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Irkadura

a novel by Ksenia Anske

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For Michael Gruber, who asked me to write this book.

Chapter 1. Dura

Irka stopped talking the moment she learned how to talk. It was a sunny day. She just got done peeing into a pot and waddled over to her mother for panty pulling.

"*Dua.*" She said brightly. Only two, Irka couldn't roll a proper Russian 'r' yet. "*Dua, dua.*" She heard the word *dura* often, not knowing that it meant *female fool*, under the best of circumstances. Under the worst of circumstances, it meant *retarded bitch*, and that's how it was used in Marinova household, comprised entirely of women: Irka's mother, aunt, cousin, grandmother and great grandmother, all crammed into a three bedroom flat on the last floor of a Soviet apartment building.

"*Dua, dua, dua!*" Irka poked the snoring shape on the mattress.

Marina Marinova grunted and opened one eye. Her normal morning started with a couple bottles of *Zhigulevskoe* beer. Money ran scarce this month and she couldn't afford her hangover remedy, suffering the consequences in the form of a blinding headache. The sun didn't help. Marina sat, reeling.

"*Dua! Dua!*" Irka chanted on repeat, clapping hands, her feet doing a little dance, as much as fallen panties permitted.

"*Che? Wha...?*" Marina blinked.

"*Dua.*" Said Irka uncertainly. In her short life she learned to recognize her mother's tone of voice, predicting the future with astounding accuracy. It went down two paths, bad and not so bad.

Comprehension dawned on Marina's face. "*Che ty skazala? Whaddya say? Dura? Ya te pokazhu dura!* I'll show you *dura!*" Her movements, swift and precise, indicated years of practice.

Irka flew across the room, slammed into the pot and knocked it over. She bit on her tongue, hard. Warm urine seeped into her shirt. A shadow blocked the sunlight. Irka instinctively cowered. Later, she didn't remember how she got beaten or for how long. Fortunately, toddler memory blotted out most of its contents by the time Irka turned sixteen. She did remember one thing. The garish orange curtains, the way threads hung off the frayed bottom, the way they flapped in rhythm to her mother's fists. Since then she couldn't stand orange things, and she stopped talking, for good. At first, due to a swollen tongue, then out of terror, then out of sheer habit.

Irka learned that being quiet had its advantages. One, women in her family stopped bothering her, thinking her an idiot and nicknaming her *Irkadura*. Two, men got bored of her faster.

What do they always want with me? I'm so ugly, thought Irka. She hated her mousy hair, her midget height, her sizeable boobs and ass that developed way too early. School uniforms never fit her and boys constantly attempted to lift her skirt to see what panties she wore. She ignored them with stubborn silence. It was nothing compared to what she endured at home.

To remedy their financial situation, Marina occasionally brought home men, picking them up like stray dogs, the filthiest, the smelliest, and the hairiest she could find. None of them lasted long, kicked out in a few weeks by sharp glares and colorful words of Nadezhda Marinova, Irka's great grandmother. In one case she successfully used the broom as an aid to convince a particularly stubborn specimen. With years Nadezhda's health deteriorated and she spent her days in bed, shuffling out only to use the bathroom or drink tea. Irka's grandmother Valentina, or Valya for short, turned a blind eye to her daughter's antics, camping out with Sonya, Irka's aunt, and Lenchka, Irka's younger cousin, in the adjacent room, complete with three cats, two dogs, a rat, and a hedgehog. This left only one room for Irka to share with her mother, and, subsequently, with any man she brought home. All of them took ample advantage of this fact, using Irka as a convenient mutie pet, until they tired of both women, stole whatever was worth stealing and disappeared, leaving Marina drunk and wailing.

All, except Lyosha Ivanenko, who stuck.

He showed up at the door one day, flowers in one hand, a sack of vodka in another, a butcher who spent last three years in prison for thievery and just got discharged. He became Marina's glorious achievement in finding the lowest scum on the streets of Moscow, the likes of which didn't exist in the recently disbanded Soviet Union according to its newspapers and television. Irka was fifteen. Her bust burst out of the bra that didn't fit anymore, her body showed through the hand-me-down housecoat.

Lyosha's eyes glinted. To ascertain his fatherly position, on the very first night he pumped Marina with alcohol until she passed out, then pressed Irka into a corner and fondled her with a sick grin. He did it in their room, but with time grew bold, handing her in the kitchen in plain view. Old Nadezhda, the only woman who would've given Lyosha a piece of her mind, barely showed her face. Valya turned a blind eye, coming home late and leaving early for her nursing job. Sonya and Lenochka were gone to meet young men qualified for a potential marriage.

The only positive change Lyosha brought was forcing all Marinova women to stop walking around the house in underwear or plain naked. And so, unchallenged, he stayed for a whole year, spending his days watching the small black and white TV, drinking vodka, singing post-war songs and fondling Marina in

the kitchen while she cooked, winking at Irka every time she happened to look. It signified the oncoming of her nightly regimen. Marina served as an appetizer. Irka's body was what interested Lyosha most, her ripe breasts, her fleshy thighs, and the lack of virginity between them, taken a long time ago by one of Marina's passing boyfriends. When, Irka couldn't remember. Resistance never crossed her mind. Trained to give up her body for the use of others, either as a punching bag or as a source of pleasure, she turned herself numb and escaped into her head.

Irka grew up with three types of touch. Hitting. Groping. And sinking of filthy limbs into her very being, making her want to puke. She always contained the urge, emptying her stomach after, while crouched over the toilet bowl on the cold floor. None of the episodes lasted long anyway, the potency of her mother's boyfriends fluctuating roughly between a few jerks to a couple minutes at the most, that is, if they could get it up after drinking for hours. Not the case with Lyosha. He happened to maintain both a boar's stamina and looks, or perhaps his job of slaughtering pigs rubbed off on his personality. Over the course of the year Irka's patience ran ragged, until one night he hurt her so bad that something snapped in her. She couldn't stand it any longer and decided to run.

Chapter 2. Irka's Escape

Irka woke with a start. The room smelled of alcohol and burned cigarettes. Her mother didn't smoke, but Lyosha used the balcony as his outhouse, throwing cigarette stubs into a pile and occasionally urinating into it, to show his power or perhaps to mark his territory, the primitive animal that he was.

Nostalgia crushed Irka's heart. She glanced at the wall calendar. September 1st of 1993, Wednesday, Knowledge Day, the day she'd be going back to school, only not anymore. She graduated this summer, at sixteen, one year earlier than her peers, because Marina sent her to school at six and not at seven, to get rid of her faster. She lived with her mother on inertia, watching her classmates successfully get accepted at various Moscow Institutes and Universities, not knowing what to do with herself, spending her days cooking, cleaning, and changing Nadezhda's bedpans.

Irka was done being cooped up in an apartment with two alcoholics, an ignorant grandmother, a dying great grandmother, a passing aunt and a cousin who grew up into a pre-teen with a knack for torturing her by turning over plates of food while she was eating, to the exploding laughter of the entire family. She

was sick of the wandering hedgehog that bit her once when she kicked it, sick of the smelly rat, the kittens peeing anywhere they liked, the dogs having sex under the kitchen table, Valya drowning newborn puppies in the bucket and throwing them down the garbage chute, sick of the chaos, the filth, the contact scratching of cockroaches in the corners, the mites in the bedding, the dirty clothes on the floor, piles of moldy dishes, shouts over who would be washing them, shouts over everything, the yelling, the screaming, the fighting, the pulling of the hair, the, the...

Irka realized she was sobbing. She wiped her face and slunk out of bed, careful not to disturb Lyosha's prominent bulk. More than anything, she was sick of his breath on her face, his hands on her skin, sick of him roughing her up to the point where everything between her legs burned. She dressed hastily, stuffed a change of clothes into her backpack, grabbed meager 5 *rubles* 69 *kopeek* from a jar, family's savings, and slipped her mother's wedding ring off for a good measure, wondering why her father married this sorry image of a woman in the first place and where he was right now, having abandoned his wife after Irka's birth.

Knowing every floorboard by heart, Irka stepped out of the room and crept along the corridor, careful not to disturb the dogs, quietly clicked the door behind her and let out a long sigh. She made it out without waking anyone.

A shadow stirred. I took on a shape of a man and unfolded with a bellow worthy of a military commander. "Thief! Thief!" He rose out of a nest of blankets and charged.

Irka skidded down the stairs instead of calling the jittery elevator.

In the recent years, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of the free commerce, more and more people fell victim of scams, lost their apartments and became homeless, a phenomenon for the newly minted Russia that didn't like to think it had such a problem. A constant stream of bums invaded their ninth floor's landing, chiefly behind the stairs to the roof, until militia cleaned them out. Stubborn like weed, they returned. When she could, Irka gave them stolen food from the school cafeteria, bringing it home wrapped in a napkin.

Panting, she made it to the bottom floor and ran out, nearly bumping into a family of three. A bright-eyed boy in a uniform, a bouquet of flowers held high, a proper mother and father behind him, on their way to walk him to school. The woman cursed at her, the man shouted, Irka bent her head and sprinted, trying to make as much distance between the building and herself in as short time as possible. She turned a corner and slowed her pace, lest she managed to attract attention of wandering militia men who liked stopping her on the street to ask for papers and openly ogle at her, amusing themselves with raunchy remarks

while she produced her newly printed passport that indicated that she was a sixteen year old girl with an appropriate Moscow residence permit and not a prostitute of twenty. They always let her go, reluctantly, punching jokes in her back.

Causing a flock of pigeons to scatter, Irka made it to the subway station, dropped the required 5 *kopeek* into the automatic stall's slot, squeezed through and darted for the train car, getting on board of which required a certain science during rush hours. You had to elbow your way through, cannon forward, part the mass of bodies, then find a spot from with an easy access to a handhold, in case the train lurched and you ran the risk of finding yourself thrown into somebody's smelly armpit or, worse, falling over the row of sitting people who immediately scolded you for either poor balance, or bad manners, or both.

The bland recorded female voice announced next station, the doors slammed shut, and Irka took hold of the metal bar jutting over her head. The car heaved. People around her shifted in one direction like a can of sardines, their morning breath, their unwashed or overly perfumed stink mixing with the greyness of their faces, fit for a funeral. *Typical morning*, thought Irka, and dared to relax.

A hand landed on her buttock, squeezed, squeezed again. Irka stiffened, a familiar nausea spreading over her like a blanket. This happened often in public transport. She dressed in

bulky hand-me-downs to conceal her shape, chopped off her bangs in such a way that they covered half her face, slouched and walked as unobtrusively as possible. Still, she held an irresistible attraction to almost every male whose path she crossed, their loins starved for sex in the country that suppressed the idea of its people procreating in anything except work for the benefit of the state, feeding its children stories of storks bringing swaddled babies.

"*Ostorozhno! Careful!*" Shouted an elderly woman. In her yearning to inch away from the hand, Irka leaned too close to a seated matron stuffed in a coat, her sweaty face peering from under a fur hat despite the temperature being only ten degrees Celsius. The car jolted and came to a stop. A wave of people streamed out, another filed in, but the hand stayed, joined by a reeking breath into Irka's neck. A trickle of sweat ran down her back. Firmly jammed between people, she had no choice but to turn around and face the perpetrator.

It took her another few stops to muster the courage, and suddenly he was gone. Irka studied the crowd, but nothing jumped out at her from the soggy mass of grey, faces so dull you couldn't break them out of their misery even if you wanted to. With a sigh she realized, she didn't know where she was going. She had no destination in her head, no idea where she would spend the night or what she would eat when her money ran out.

That's when the first wave of nausea hit her. Her throat went dry, her ears rung, dots swarmed in front of her eyes. The train car bounced, accelerated, and her hand slipped off the bar. She swayed, holding herself upright for a second, and collapsed on the knees of the matron in the fur hat, her shouts drowning in a blurry noise.

Chapter 3. Bad News

A slap on her face brought Irka around. She blinked. A few figures hunched over her came into focus, the matron, some man with a beard, and a subway militia lady, red lipstick applied in abundance. They muttered something between themselves. The matron nodded and slapped Irka again. Irka coughed, sour bile filling her mouth. Matron's face spread into a smile, showing off two golden teeth.

"*Molodec!* Good job. Get up, get up. You'll ruin your kidneys, sitting on cold stone like that." She took a heavy breath and made to stand.

"*Kuda?* Where you going? What am I going to do with her? No, you stay and help me." Said the militia lady, glaring. "*A ty che sidish?* What good are you, sitting doing nothing?" This was directed at the bearded man.

"*Izvinite.* Pardon me, lady, it's no way to talk to me. What is this? Where is your respect?"

"*Ladno, hvatit.* Okay, enough, let's get her up." The lady pointed at the man.

"Why me? What do I know? I only stopped to look. Don't have to help. Late for work as it is. Almost eight. Shurik said he

catches me late again, goodbye my job. Can't afford it, can I?"
He pointed to his wristwatch.

Irka pulled herself into a sitting position, feeling weak. Fainting didn't fit into her escape plans. Fainting wasn't something she had ever experienced in her life, refusing to taste alcohol every time her mother offered. She coughed again, choking down the bitterness.

"Then whaddya you stop to look at?" The militia lady propped her arms akimbo. "Go on! Get on with your life! Let the women fix it for you."

"What's your name?" The matron asked, mopping her forehead.

Irka stared. After a few seconds she forced herself to slide her backpack off and rummaged inside, producing her passport and opening it on the page with her picture and her name.

"*Nemaya chtoli?* Mute, are you?" Said the militia lady.

Irka nodded.

Scores of legs rushed past her. A few people muttered displeasure at Irka hindering their progress by occupying a considerable chunk of space right on the platform, but none stopped or offered help. Irka, holding on to the marble column in an effort to stand up, doubled down under another wave of queasiness, and this time she vomited all over the floor, in three hot gushes of smelly liquid.

"*Mozhet beremennya?* Is she pregnant?" Wondered the matron. The three of them shrugged. "Are you pregnant?" She asked Irka, peering in her face. Irka lost all feeling. The word cut through her gut. Having been subjected to forceful intercourse for most of her life, she never connected the two and two together. Nobody explained to her how children were made. While girls at school giggled when their botany teacher explained how birds did it, Irka hardly paid attention. She experienced it first-hand, but pregnancy was never on her radar. Despite her early development, she had her period late, at thirteen, and so far miraculously remained barren despite the fact that none of her mother's boyfriends used any protection.

What if I am pregnant? She thought. *By whom, by Lyosha?* Oh, no, no-no-no. Not him. No, please no. The idea of a baby in her stomach, an ugly half-boar half-human bent her once more and she threw up again, splattering the boots of the militia woman.

"*Smotri kuda blyuesh, dura!* Watch it, *dura!*" She screamed. "What mess you made." She stomped, to shake off the vomit. "Tyotya Dasha! Here."

A bent woman of an unidentifiable age, a bucket in one hand, a broom with a slimy rag around it in another, came over and started cleaning without a word.

Irka stood, quivering. In the commotion the bearded man successfully evaporated, leaving her in the care of the women,

who presently decided whether they should get her to the hospital or to militia. Irka spurred into action. She waited until both women seemed so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't pay her any mind, scooped up her backpack and darted into the oncoming train car. Its doors slammed right when the militia lady sprung to it. She shouted something. The driver honked, she jumped away and they took off.

For the next several stops she studied Moscow subway map, desperately trying to decide where to go, but in the end her feet decided for her. When Irka was thirteen, Marina took on liking artists, citing the fact that they were actual intelligentsia worth saving off the streets where they blared Soviet songs, or, worse, sung in bad English what they deemed popular on the other continent, drunk by freedom unattainable in Soviet years, yet still being rounded up by militia every time they didn't look right or failed to produce an appropriate bribe or angered local mob.

Gosha Zemchin was a failed actor. He drank his past glory days away, performing monologues from famous plays to a thin street crowd with little success. He spent only a week in their apartment, but in that week he managed to recite to Irka most of Chekhov, took her to a play, letting himself in through a backdoor, and showed her the stage after the performance, explaining the inner workings of a theater. He never touched

Irka in a filthy way, bought her sugar roosters on a stick, and smiled when he talked. Irka missed him. The day he brought her to watch the play, she fell in love with theater.

She wanted to become an actress, like the beautiful women who cried and laughed on the stage, dressed in magnificent dresses, their hair braided into impossible concoctions the likes of which Irka didn't see before and which caused her to spend hours and hours in front of the mirror at home, trying to replicate them.

On a whim, and perhaps with the hope of glimpsing some of that beauty absent from her daily life, Irka stepped out at *Tverskaya* station and walked into the city, passing the first McDonalds that opened in Moscow, weaving through people standing in line to get in. Finally, she made it to a tall arch in a Stalinist high-rise and stopped, suddenly afraid.

It led to the back of the theater, a classic Greek building with columns and a marble porch. Irka took a step and halted again, catching her breath. Theater signified to her a different world full of glorious life inaccessible to simple people. You had to be smart, talented, and gorgeous to become an actress. Irka scowled, looking down at herself. She was neither of those things, a squat teenager with a forgettable face and a bust that was suited for breaking walls and not for display in a cleavage.

She took a deep breath, fixed her backpack, and ascended the steps with a beating heart.

Chapter 4. To The Theater

The door creaked as Irka opened it. A woman hunched over the desk in a booth, grey shawl draped around her shoulders. She didn't look up. Irka stepped closer. This was where Gosha passed by with a smile, saying his hellos and complimenting everyone around him instead of showing a badge like other actors did, buying his way in with a charm and with obvious knowledge of the theater personnel that Irka lacked.

She took another step. The glass partition held a single piece of paper taped to it. It said, "*Nuzhna uborshica*. In need of a cleaning lady." Irka thought about it. She cleaned their apartment her whole life, after getting tired of listening to the bickering, silently washing every single plate in the kitchen, scooping up dog poop and mopping the floors, usually deep into the night when she collapsed from exhaustion. Never able to clean it all to her satisfaction, she avoided the place by staying late at school or by pretending she wasn't there, at first doodling things on the wallpaper, but then, after being severely beaten for it, doodling in her school notebooks, and, eventually, starting to write short diary entries into a small journal that Gosha gave her before his departure. She still had

it, making a slow progress, beginning each entry with *Dear diary* and taking time to think before she wrote, because it was hard for Irka to formulate her thoughts, but not as hard as it was for her to talk.

"*Chto tebe nuzhno?* What do you need?" The woman finally looked up, peering over glasses. She wore a pained expression of someone who has been beaten by life and didn't expect it to turn around.

Irka tapped on the sign.

"What? You about the job?"

Irka nodded, giving her passport to the woman.

"*Ne nuzhen mne tvoy passport.* Don't need your document. Put it away. What are you, mute?" She snapped.

Irka nodded again, blushing. She badly wanted to talk, but couldn't. As soon as words rose in her mouth, she choked, producing nothing more than strangled noises. Her tongue refused to listen to her brain. An angry tear rolled down her cheek, then another. She swatted at it, hiding behind her bangs.

The woman's expression softened like butter. "*Oy, nu chto ty plachesh?* What's wrong? Why are you crying? Get over here. Come on. No good standing there crying like that." She hoisted herself up and ushered Irka to a tiny table in the corner, with a portable teakettle on it, a stack of cups on a cracked saucer, and a couple packets of cookies.

"*Hvatit*. Stop it. Here." She produced a napkin and dabbed at Irka's cheeks, a shy smile gracing her face. "Like my *Allochka*. You look like my *Allochka*. Same blue eyes. Look at you." The woman sighed, brushing Irka's bangs aside. "That son of a whore." Suddenly she burst into tears, grabbing another napkin and dabbing at her eyes. "I told her not to mingle with Sashka. Told her. But would she listen to her mother? No, of course she wouldn't. Had to have her way, didn't she. Always her way." She blew her nose loudly, making a fuss of cleaning it.

Irka sat still, afraid to break the spell. Yes, she couldn't talk and suffered because of it, but she also tended to open up people into spilling their lives to her, perhaps because she never interrupted them. It saved her in school. Every girl in class told her a secret or two. She lived through their stories, gobbled up tales of their first kisses, first break-ups, first loves, something Irka thought she'd never have.

"...rode it right into tree, drunken bastard. Died instantly, both of them. Oh, grief! Grief to a mother, to outlive her child. If you ever have children, by God I hope you never outlive them, girl, you hear me? By God!" She crossed herself.

Irka nodded again, hoping she looked attentive enough.

"Well, no good sitting here like this. Let's have some tea, you'll feel better. We'll both feel better. Never can hurt having tea, can it?" She got herself busy dousing loose

tealeaves into a small pot and pushing a button on the kettle.

"What do you need? You need a job, do you? Did you ran away, is that what you did? Are you a Moscowite? No? Came on the train, did you? To make money in the big city?" She plopped two cups on the sticky linoleum tablecloth.

Irka shook her head and offered her passport again.

"Let's see here. Let me take a look." The woman took off her glasses, cleaned them on a shawl, and put them back on again. "Irina Marinova, date of birth May ninth 1977... like the victory day, by God. Born in the city of..." She mumbled the rest, scanning the paper up and down. "So you're only sixteen?"

Irka lowered her eyes in acknowledgement.

"You look all twenty! I thought you were on of those. Come to Moscow in hordes, prostitutes is what they are, can't stand them. But you're a Moscow girl, that's a different thing!" She beamed, pouring tea into cups and breaking open the paper.

"Here, have a cookie. Faina is my name." She added. "Faina Ilinichna. Eat, I said. No good looking at them cookies. Eat them."

She pushed the plate to Irka.

Irka obliged. Hot tea scalded her lips but made her stomach feel better, and a cookie soothed it even more. Her nausea retreated, and Irka decided the pregnancy idea into the back of her mind, like she did with all of her problems. *It will go*

away, she thought, *for sure it will go away, I will just ignore it.* She didn't notice how she ate half a pack of cookies, listening to Faina recount horrible details of her daughter's death, the authorities arriving late, the car costs, the funeral costs, how she'd never hear the laughter of a baby, never have a grandson or a granddaughter, and what grief it is, to never be a grandmother, how she wished she held a baby in her arms, and on and on it went, until a knock interrupted them.

A wiry man bounded in, his belly protruding from an otherwise gaunt frame like a football. He brought with him a sour smell of beer and an aura of authority.

"Whatcha doing, Ilinichna?" He addressed the woman.
 "Drinking your time away?"

"Oy! Vladimir Michaiylovich. Pardon, pardon. Got carried away. This young lady here, applying for the job. Distracted me. You know how easily distracted I am. Shoo! Get up!" She waved at Irka. "This is Vladimir Michaylovich Konkin, the theater manager. She's mute, you see." Faina smiled apologetically, fussing about. "Cup of tea?" Her question hung in the air, unanswered.

Irka jumped to her feet a bit too fast. Her breasts jiggled. A familiar slimy stare passed over her body, making her cringe. Konkin studied her from boobs to ass, appraising.

"Cleaning lady?" He clicked his tongue. "How old are you?"

Ilinichna thrust her passport at him. "Sixteen, see. She ain't lying, good girl. She has experience cleaning, don't you?"

Irka nodded.

"Have experience, you say? At sixteen? Where did you get experience, at sixteen, I'd like to know." Vladimir picked out a fleck of dirt from under his nail.

Irka darted a desperate look at Ilinichna, who adjusted her shawl nervously. "At a school, she said. Worked at a school. I can verify, if you want me to."

"Thought you said she's a mutie?"

"She wrote, wrote on a napkin." Ilinichna added hastily.

"What napkin?"

"Oy, Vladimir Michaylovich, I threw it away already, pardon me." Faina kneaded her shawl.

"Did she write what school she cleaned?" Konkin sneered.

"She wrote the number. You know how I am. Forgot it. Forgot already. Twenty... twenty something? Help me out. Here." Ilinichna shoved a napkin and a pencil at Irka.

She scribbled, 213.

"See, told you."

"All right. 213, then? You write but you don't talk? Silence is a virtue, my father used to say. Let's see how you do, then we can talk about payment, understood?"

Irka nodded, hoping she conveyed the urgency.

"Can you start today? Our Lyudmila fell ill, and we have a big performance tonight. Big performance." He winked. "Important people will be here. The auditorium has to be clean. Think you can manage it?"

Irka nodded vigorously several times.

"*Horosho*. Good. Let me show you around. Good job, Ilinichna. Get me a beer? I'm dry from yesterday."

"*Seichas, seichas*. Right away, right away." She adjusted her glasses. "Let me put on my shoes, put on my coat..." Ilinichna stepped out of slippers and into pumps, swung around, picked up the coat from the hook in the wall and was out in a flash.

Vladimir stepped closer to Irka, too close.

"Cleaning experience, you say? Any other experience you have? This job requires all kinds of experience, girl, if you want to keep it. Sixteen, eh? I'm sure your mama is looking for you, isn't she? Don't want me to report you to militia, do you?"

Irka shook her head.

Konkin snatched her arm and dragged her out of the both and down the steps, deep into theater's guts.

Chapter 5. The Real Job

Several flights of steps and turns, they came to a narrow corridor and trotted along, Konkin with a stride of a knowing man, Irka behind him like an animal poised for slaughter. They passed one corridor, then another. Irka thought she wouldn't be able to find her way out, it felt like a maze. They came by the back of the stage, allowing her a glimpse into the auditorium, dark and empty at this hour, and stopped by a shabby door that led into a utility room, full of spider webs, dust, and a pile of what looked like broken chairs, broomsticks, and ladders carelessly thrown over one another.

Here Konkin unceremoniously turned the girl around and slapped her on the butt. "Vo zhopa. Nice ass." He cracked up, studying her reaction. Irka tensed but didn't make a sound. Satisfied, he grabbed her ass again, kneading it. "To keep your job, you have to make me happy. You know how to make a man happy?" He lifted her chin. Irka blinked understanding. "You look like a girl who knows how to keep a man happy. Keep quiet, do as I say, and we'll both be happy, understand?" He tapped her forehead. Irka nodded with difficulty, getting herself ready. "I like how it jiggles. Let's see how it jiggles when I do this to

it, eh?" He squished both her buttocks and rubbed against them, panting into her ear. "You like it, don't you? Can't talk, can you? *Dura. Mute dura.*" Irka fell into her familiar numbness, feeling a sweaty palm travel up her shirt, down her pants. At one moment he grabbed her throat so tight, she thought she'd suffocate, but then it was over, as quick as it started.

This is it? Thought Irka. *In your pants?* She suppressed an involuntary chuckle. After Lyosha's acrobatics, this seemed like no big deal. *I can do this. This is damn easy.*

Konkin grunted, a tone of embarrassment in his voice. "*Smotri ka, ah?* See what you did? Good girl. Work like this, and you'll get paid. Paid well, get it?"

Irka didn't move.

He slapped her once more, fixing his pants and flicking something else from under his nail. "Get the broom and get to work. I want both the stage and the seating done by five, not a minute later."

Irka stood motionless, suddenly angry. Why was she born with this curse? What was it that attracted them like flies to honey? What could she do to her body to make them stop? Sometimes, after particularly nasty incidents, Irka gave herself bruises. First, she hit between her legs, because that's where it hurt most, then on her stomach, then on her chest. She'd get into rages, tearing at her pubic hair, yanking at her nipples,

and pinching her skin until it turned blue, until the pain exhausted her.

"*Nu chto smotrish?* What'ya looking at? *Davay, davay!* Get on with it. *Dura.* Remember, five o'clock." Konkin's voice jerked her out of stupor. He spat and exited the room, leaving her standing in semi-darkness. She slowly turned around, picked up a broom, and trotted out into the corridor.

Here Irka stood, paralyzed, wondering what direction the stage was, afraid to get lost on her first day.

Bright voices issued from the right. Running feet. Irka pressed herself back into the room. Two young men emerged from the stairway, and, laughing, disappeared behind separate doors. Irka cautiously waded out again.

She studied the hallway, silently walking along. Each door bore a name of an actor or actress. These were dressing rooms! She put an ear to one. A male voice hummed a tune. Feet stomped around in what might have been a dance or an excitement. Irka's heart beat faster. There was an actor inside, a real actor! Oh, how she wanted to see one, to talk to one, to ask what it was like, being onstage flooded with lights, saying beautiful words, making people laugh or cry on a whim. It must've been magic. Maybe they could teach her this magic, teach her how to speak again, how to make people enthralled.

She gulped and scurried away, before getting spotted. Her feet carried her back the way she came. Ghost lights illuminated the parterre, full of seats covered in velvet. Irka made her way to the first row and began sweeping energetically, her eyes not on the floor but on the hallway from where she came, her heart doing somersaults. She couldn't quite catch the way those young men looked, but she thought one of them had dark curly hair. She loved dark curly hair, it made her want to pass her fingers through it, to feel it. Irka shook her head. *Cut this silliness, right now, I said, cut it!* She thought. *No use dreaming. They're actors, and who are you? Look at you. You're ugly. UGLY. Remember your place. Be grateful you got a job.*

Irka hung her head, sweeping. Meticulously, she went through row after row, until several hours later the entire audience floor gleamed, if not for a few piles of garbage here and there. Irka slapped her head. She forgot the dustpan. She leaned the broom to the wall and ran back, intending to get out as fast as she could. A few stage workers emerged in the last few minutes, lowering the backdrop and beginning to assemble what looked like a complicated performance prop. She didn't want to miss a minute of it.

Halfway through to utility room, a door opened, and the dark-haired actor stepped out. Irka ran head-on into him. Her breath got knocked out of her. She jumped, trembling, unable to

move, not so much from the shock of collision, but from the shock of splendor.

The boy, as he was certainly not much older than her, wore full stage makeup which accentuated his features. He was dressed in a plain leotard, more suitable for a circus acrobat. Irka involuntarily glanced down and wished she didn't. She blushed.

"Hey!" Said the actor. "*Kuda tak bezhish?* Where are you running so fast?" He smiled.

That was as much as Irka could bear. She lowered her head and darted around him. He called from behind, but she ignored him, staggering into the utility room and pressing herself into the wall. The actor's image was burned into her brain. It hung in the darkness, making her ache. She could never have this boy, could she? No, of course not. *That's okay though*, thought Irka, resigned to her fate, *I can look at him. That's right. There is no harm in looking. I'll make sure he won't see me. He's an actor, he's used to people looking at him, I'm sure he wouldn't mind.*

Yet a deeply hidden part of her harbored hope, desperate hope of a girl who thought herself ugly that this boy might like her one day, might even fall in love with her, for some strange reason. Strange things happened in life all the time. Why couldn't she be the lucky one? But then she dismissed it. It was no good dreaming, she knew that from experience. Bad things

happened to those who dared to dream. She ought to think of things in the worst way possible, then she wouldn't be disappointed when everything fell apart. It was her way of surviving.

Irka took a deep breath, picked up the dustpan and sauntered back. Both actors skipped about by the stage, playing tag and hooting. The other actor was slightly older and taller. His long blond hair played in the floodlights. Irka busied herself with scooping up garbage piles and carrying them to the bin. When done, she made her way onstage. A few workers yelled at her, demanding she get out of the way. She held up her broom as an excuse, sweeping around them.

"Where is Lyudmila?" A voice startled her.

The dark-haired boy touched her shoulder gently. He tore his fingers away as soon as Irka straightened. She hasn't experienced a touch like that, and it made her want more. It had no filth in it, only polite interest. Why couldn't everyone touch her like that? Her eyes down, she pointed to the broom.

The boy cocked his head to one side. Blondie sauntered up to him, whispering. "Who is this?"

"Don't know. New cleaning girl?"

"Who are you?" Blondie said unkindly.

Irka pointed to the broom again.

"What? Forgot how to talk?"

Irka shrugged, not being able to bring herself to nod. Let them think that she could, maybe she could fool them long enough before finding a way to do it.

"*Dura kakaya-to*. Some *dura*. Come on, Pavlik, we have to practice before Sim gets here." Said the blond actor and flipped his hair.

"*Nu zachem ty tak, Kostik. Ne nado*. Don't say this, Kostik. Just, please, don't. Be nice."

"*Davayte, rebyata, shevelites!* Come on, guys, get a move on!" A booming voice coming from the auditorium startled them. "You look like flies pumped with cheap vodka. You disgust me. Wake up! I want Pavlik to start. Kostik, you next." There were a few sharp handclaps. "What is this? What are these people doing here? Remove all theater personnel from stage, my sweet pussies. We're having a rehearsal here! Do you understand the meaning of this important word? Re-hear-sal. I sure hope I don't need to repeat myself." A looming shape of an exquisitely dressed man floated to the stage and leaned on it. His broad face had a star quality, as did his behavior. Fine perfume tickled Irka's nostrils. A firm hand pushed her from behind.

"All personal off stage, hear what director said? *Davay*." One of the workers ushered Irka out. She had one more glimpse before disappearing behind the curtain, and that was of Pavlik,

the dark-haired actor, climbing a half-assembled structure in fast expert strides.

Chapter 6. The Performance

Darkness hushed the audience. There was a moment of stillness, broken only by a few shy coughs, then the conductor lifted his baton. Music burst from the orchestra pit. The curtain parted. Lights swiveled to illuminate a series of skeletal cubes stacked to form what looked like remains of a building. Irka held her breath, mesmerized. It was her second time in the theater. She hid in the corner of a balcony, peering down.

A spotlight tore out white figure of Pavlik kneeling by the edge of the stage. He looked up and started a monologue, his voice rising and falling, his face rolling through a multitude of emotions. Irka couldn't quite make out the echoy words from above, but she didn't care. Watching him speak was enough. A lock of hair spilled on his face. He stood, gesturing.

Kostik ran out, as if lost. Pavlik came up to him. They engaged in a dialogue full of tears and drama. The audience oohed and aahed and clapped. Irka clapped with everyone else. More actors filed onstage. Soon, they started climbing the structure, all the way to the top, from where Pavlik tumbled spectacularly into its middle. Irka suppressed a cry, afraid he injured himself, but Pavlik bounded up and strolled to the

front, as did the rest of the troupe. They leaned over one another, forming a grotesque shape, and stood still. The curtain closed to jeering and applause.

The first act ended. Spectators noisily shuffled out of the auditorium, elbowing each other to get to the cafeteria first.

Irka stayed in her corner, barely sensing minutes pass, pressing herself into the shadows. Hardly anyone noticed her. She heard the scuffle of stage workers behind the curtain, heard the crowd murmur in the foyer. At last, bells chimed, calling the end of the intermission. Audience hastily made its way back, some still chewing food. The lights went out again. The second act started. There was more Pavlik, more Kostik, more emotion floating in the air. Irka found herself smiling, crying, and quivering to every word, regardless of its meaning. She forgot herself, soaring above the crowd, submerged in the story. She didn't want it to end. Long after the applause died and both stage and auditorium cleared out, she stood, pressed into the wall, daydreaming.

Watching plays and rehearsals became her nightly escape.

A week flew by as if in a trance. Every day Irka cleaned, and every night she snuck up to the balcony. Her nausea bouts disappeared, and she forgot all about them. After each performance she silently endured Konkin's squeezing and rubbing, but never penetration, waited for his departure, pretending like

she was getting ready to leave, then slunk away and hid behind a rack of suits in one of the unused dressing rooms, sleeping on a pile of costumes in a corner. Konkin clearly communicated to her that no personnel was allowed to stay in the theater after hours, and each time Irka nodded her understanding, trembling inside. She had nowhere to go.

Every morning she woke up, did her washing business in one of the restrooms, drank tea and cookies with Ilinichna who warmed up to the girl considerably and filled her with latest theater gossip, then swept and mopped and dusted the whole theater, not just the stage and the auditorium. She impressed the manager so much that he allowed her to tidy up in the dressing rooms, and she spent most of her time cleaning Pavlik's, running her fingers through his costumes, looking at his pictures and newspaper clippings on the wall, marveling at the makeup by the mirror, and trying to avoid him as much as she could. They still managed to bump into each other once in a while, Pavlik always smiling and Irka always blushing, head low.

She got her meager pay at the end of the week and ate lunch in the theater cafeteria, witnessing the director rounding up the actors and lecturing them on his ideas. He was a big and an important man, she could tell by the way he conducted himself. His face was plastered in every newspaper clipping hung on the walls, his portrait graced the front of the theater, along with

those of senior actors. People whispered his name, Sim Novy, with reverence. He was clearly a famous theater director, but Irka had a slimy feeling about him. She didn't like the way he treated Pavlik, like his pet. And she didn't like Pavlik's close friend, Kostik, an arrogant actor who clearly vied for Sim's attention, jealous of Pavlik's position and full of superior attitude, especially when he happened to pass Irka. He always looked through her, like the girl didn't exist, walking by as one would walk by a piece of furniture.

Irka wasn't new to this treatment and it rolled over her like water over a duck. She managed to sneak into every rehearsal, soaking up as much as she could from theater life. In quiet moments, early in the morning or late in the evening, after the building got locked up for the night or before it opened, Irka snuck onstage, miming at the invisible audience and pretending to be an actress. It gave her chills, both the thrill of imagining herself in a play and the dare of defying Konkin's rules. He said if he'd ever catch her doing what she was not supposed to do, he'd cut her from the job, though Irka seriously doubted it, as he got used to her services by now and she could probably bribe things out of him by doing extra favors. After all, she was skilled in things most sixteen-year-old girls didn't dream about or couldn't imagine. Filthy, dirty things.

She reserved them for the black day. Smart girl. The black day came when she least expected it, as black days always do.

Things never go unseen in a theater. People talk. Somebody has slipped a rumor to Konkin, a rumor he wanted to investigate himself.

Irka has just got done burrowing into the pile of costumes, when the door slammed open, the light flickered on and Konkin rushed at her, yanking the suits off the rack and lifting her up in one jerk.

"*Ah ty, padla!* You bitch! I told you not to sleep in here. Ilinichna said you live with a friend. You lied to her, huh? Liar! Get out of here. Out! *Poshla!*"

Irka choked, gesticulating. She reached for his groin.

"*Kuda lezesh, ah?* What do you want with this, ah? You think sucking me off will solve all your problems? It doesn't work like this, girly. I have orders, get it? Orders are orders. My job is very important to me. People are talking. You're not supposed to sleep in here, period. Either you find a place to say or bye-bye your job, understand?"

He shoved her out. She twisted out of his grip and darted for her backpack and jacket, tore them from the hook and took off, running ahead of Konkin, through the maze of the corridors, up the stairs, by the booth where Ilinichna was putting on her

hat and shawl. She cast her eyes down as Irka sprinted by. Irka pushed the door and ran out, breathing hard.

She should've seen it coming, should've prepared for this. She got too comfortable, too lazy. Theater-shmeater. Yeah, right. You always get caught off guard when you get lazy. *Nu chto, nasladilas? Well? Did you get your fill?* She thought. *Nice, wasn't it? All nice things end, did you forget that? And whose fault was it, huh? Tell me.* She caught her breath, fuming.

Now what are you gonna do?

Chapter 7. Through Dark Streets

September wind ruffled Irka's hair. A few streetlights seeped yellow glare, hardly enough to illuminate the night. She stalked off under the arch and emerged by a wide road. Despite the late hour, cars streamed in both directions. Downtown Moscow never slept, staying congested as late as two in the morning. A few people passed her, hurrying on their way. Irka didn't have a watch, but she thought it must've been close to ten in the evening. She hoisted up her backpack and marched ahead without any idea where legs would carry her.

A militia *Zhiguli* flashed its lights and blared a siren. Spooked, Irka darted into the next arch, trotting deeper and deeper into the web of shaggy alleys. Calls startled her. She lurched behind bushes, peering out. Car lights flooded a line of girls in pumps and minis poised against the backdrop of trash containers. The girls twisted this way and that. After a few minutes a man got out of the car, approached them. A short conversation later, he led one of them back. The car took off, only to be replaced by another one. And another one. They came every few minutes. Irka stood, frozen. She heard stories in the

theater cafeteria about *Tverskaya* street prostitutes, but never saw them herself. This must've been their workplace.

A militia car rolled up. Immediately, as if preselected, two girls darted inside, slamming passenger doors. Irka gaped after them until the red lights disappeared. She couldn't tell how long she stood like this, watching. Everything was done hush-hush and in a hurry. It seemed both forbidden and interesting for her to witness this life of glamour and money. She considered selling her body as an option for the blackest of the black days. After all, her skills included an array of filthy things not many girls were able to perform, or so she hoped, having little contact with anyone as experienced as her and judging only from the stories Lyosha shared in his moments of rare soberness, teaching her proper techniques of giving a man unprecedented pleasure.

A hand tapped on her shoulder. Irka wheeled around.

A grinning face hung over her, eyes glistening from under a beanie pulled low. "*Ey, krasavica*. Hey, beautiful. Watcha doing here? Looking for a job?" The face snorted.

Irka's blood stilled.

A couple of hostile sniggers rattled the air. A gang of guys, by the look of it barely in their twenties, trundled up to her, a couple of them smoking.

Irka shook her head. Heart pounded in her ears. She took a step back and smashed into branches. There was no way out. To the left of her loomed an apartment building, to the right the gang pressed on. She got quickly surrounded by interested pairs of eyes, sliding her up and down. One guy flicked a lighter and held it to her face. "*Niche, ah? Soidet.* Not bad, eh? Should do okay. A bit too fat for me." He said, snorting and spitting.

"I like them fat. Something to hold on to." Said a voice. A cackle of laughter followed.

"*Che molchish, ah? Boishsa?* Why so silent, eh? Are you afraid or something? Don't be afraid, we're gentle folk. Won't touch a hair on your head, only your pussy." Said the Beanie, inching closed.

A few guys cracked up behind him.

"For your information, it's not very nice, not talking like that. An elder is asking you a question. Didn't your mother teach you? Bad mother. But not to worry, *krasavica*. Uncle Roma is here. Uncle Roma will teach you proper manners. Say *hello, uncle Roma.*" Roma grabbed her chin and lifted it.

Irka swallowed, mentally preparing herself for the worst.

"*Smotri-ka, molchit.* Lookee, silent as a lamb. We like that. Silent is good. You'll earn yourself more cream that way, right, boys?" Roma reached for Irka's breasts and wobbled them. "Nice tits." Irka stiffened, familiar nausea welling up in her.

There was no way she could put up a fight with six men, even with the muscle and strength she inherited from her mother. The only way to survive this was to relax and to let it be over with quickly.

Distant calls floated from the inner court where the prostitutes paraded their goods. Irka jerked her head in that direction. She could cry out, call for help. But she couldn't. No sound came from her lips, not even a sigh. A callused hand rolled over her mouth.

"*Dimon, cops.*" Said the guy with the lighter. "*Rebyata, poshli otsyuda.* Guys, let's get out of here." They exchanged a few ideas on where exactly it would be safe to drag their catch and bang her so they wouldn't be disturbed, intermingling words with vulgar profanities. Irka suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to pee. Mistaking her struggling for unrest, Roma choked her, whispering threats. Half-shuffling, half-dragging her, they scuffled by the bushes, rounded the building and stumbled into a damp *podyezd*, an entryway into the building. Here, under the flickering light of a single light bulb, in the corner between two apartment doors on the concrete floor, they pushed her down and made a go, one after another, ripping off her clothes, slapping and grabbing and hitting and shoving themselves in, shaking from thrill, spilling warm stink on her face and stomach.

Irka made herself numb. It didn't help. A few guys went for a second round. The only noise she heard was grunting and strange scraping coming from behind the door. Her flesh chafed, then burned, then felt shredded by many little knives. Air stunk with sweat and semen. She couldn't hold it anymore and let out a stream of urine. Whoever was on top of her shrieked and slapped her.

"*Ah ty, suka! Nassala na menya!* You bitch! You peed on me!"

"*Poidem, Sashok, horosh.* Leave her, Sashok, that's enough."

More scraping came from behind the door.

Feral fear passed across their faces.

Irka coughed. Sour bile welled up in her. She gagged and vomited over herself, unable to turn to the side.

"*Pizda ebanaya, eshe tolko obostratsa ostalos.* Fucking cunt, now all you need is shit yourself." Sashok kicked her with his boot. Irka moaned.

There was definite movement behind the apartment door, as if someone was watching the scene unfold, either out of perverted interest or helpless fear. Someone coughed.

Guys startled, hastily readjusting their pants.

Roma leaned to the door and shouted in the gap. "*Ey, raspizdyay ebany!* Hey, lazy fuck! Jerked off yet? Or you like to look cause you can't get it up? In either case, I want payment for the show, in cash. You have three hours."

Movement stopped.

Roma leaned away. "*Blyad*. Fuck this. Let's scoot. If weren't so busy tonight," he shouted through the door, "I'd skin you alive. Be grateful uncle Roma is busy. But I'll make an exception for you and come back to visit. I know where you live." He looked down at Irka. "Let this be a lesson to you. Don't walk the streets alone after dark, like your mama told you. Bad things happen to bad girls who walk alone." He kneeled next to her. Sashok and the lighter guy tugged on his shoulders, urging him to leave before they got spotted. He cursed and waved them off. "You're happen to be in luck. Uncle Roma likes bad girls, uncle Roma calls them *blyadi*. *Blyadi* like being fucked, don't they? Come again when your cunt has an itch, you know where to find us." He stood, and without another glance took off, shoving his gang mates ahead of him like a pack of frightened studs that have temporarily lost it and pissed their pants.

Irka remained on the cold floor, unable to move. She stopped feeling her ass, then legs, then arms, which was a good thing. It helped dull the pain. Hours must have passed before she heard a lock behind her click. What sounded like a series of chains slid in their rusty grooves, and the door creaked open. Irka turned her head, glimpsed grey hair and passed out.

She came to her senses slowly, swaying back and forth. Gradually, a roof came into focus, an indiscreet roof of some sort of a van. Irka felt a crinkly cotton sheet underneath her. It took her brain a few minutes to process the information, to connect the medical smell with the sound of a rambling engine. She was in an ambulance. Her inner thighs screamed, and everything above them curdled into a mass of throbbing agony. Her bladder burned, her stomach twisted, full of nagging ache ten times worse than her period. She thought she'd burst any moment, exploding in an unsightly pile of guts.

Lulled by the swaying, she drifted off, then woke again when hands heaved her from the van onto a stretcher. Voices called, mundane voices, with an everyday boring tone of someone doing their job only because they had to. She got lifted and lowered, then busted between glass doors, under fluorescent lights that quickly gave way to a gloom of a stone passageway, badly built.

"*Natash, k tebe.* Natasha, this one for you. Eighth floor, is it? Or should I tell Litvinova first?" A thin female voice spoke over her head.

"Forget Litvinova. We're full. Only couple beds left. I don't even know where to stick her. What happened?" Said another female voice, gusty and loud.

"*Iznasilovali bednyu devothcku, muzhik skazal.* Poor girl got raped, the man said. Right by his apartment door, *svolochi*. Scum. She's bleeding."

"*Oh bozhe!* Oh, my God! Why didn't you say right away?" A pasty face leaned over Irka.

"*Natash, da ty che?* What's up with you? We just got here! I'm telling you now. What do you want me to do, transmit thoughts? I'm no psychic." Scoffed the thin voice. Irka blinked. Her vision swam, as did everything in her body. Two women in washed out white coats engaged in an argument, glaring at each other.

"Those sons of bitches. I'd tear their balls off, if I were their mother. Get her over here."

"Where? Where *over here?*"

"Where-where. To the elevator. Quickly."

"If you think you're the only one overworked, I've been up since five." The ambulance nurse threw her arms in the air. "No breaks. It's what, almost four in the morning now? I've been up on my feet all day. Look at them, they're swollen again."

"*Lyuda, pomolchi.* Be quiet. I have a headache without your complaining. Come on, better help me. And don't shout, okay, Litvinova will hear you. She's on it again." Natasha patted the woman, who quickly deflated.

"Is she?" Said Lyuda.

Natasha nodded. "*Potom*. Later. For your feet. Take that drug I gave you, remember? Be easy on yourself. Have Misha do the walking. His fat ass could use some exercise."

"*Mishka-to?*" Lyuda snorted. "Yeah, like he'd do it for me in a heartbeat." She deflated. "*Nu ladno, ya ushla*. All right, I'm going. How's your son?"

"All right, it seems. Writes me letters. What can you do." Natasha sighed.

"Hang in there." The women kissed and parted.

Lyuda left.

"Oh, you poor poor girl. What did you do, silly? What did you get yourself into, huh? Young men these days." Natasha shook her head, rolling Irka to a freight elevator and pushing a button, proceeding to give the girl a piece of her mind, a common occurrence in Irka's life.

"It's not safe in the city, you hear me?" Natasha stabbed the button again. "Cursed elevator, a piece of junk. My liver is hurting, and that's a sure sign. Bad times are coming, very bad times. I've seen them gangs running about. What's to take from an old woman? Nothing. So they leave me alone. Stalin would've fixed this bedlam in no time." She cursed under her breath. "But you have to watch out. You're a young girl. You've got to get one of them pepper sprays. My son bought me one—"

The elevator doors grumbled open. Natasha rolled Irka in and pushed a burned out button on a panel.

"What's wrong with you?" Natasha suddenly said, studying the girl. "Can't you speak? What's your name?"

Irka only stared.

Chapter 8. The Kind Doctor

"*Galina Viktorovna! Devochki!* Girls! I got a bleeding one." Cold fluorescent lights blinded Irka. She squinted, half-listening to medical talk of the nurse and the sleepy woman who looked like a doctor exchanging opinions over what to do with her, a girl who didn't talk and had no documents on her except a backpack with a change of clothes. Irka curled fingers, hiding her mother's wedding ring from view. Finally, she was wheeled into a tiny room with a shabby bed along the wall and a strange contraption that consisted of an ancient computer with wires sticking out every which way. A young man in squeaky sneakers popped in his head.

"*Gorbunov*, just in time." Galina Viktorovna waved him in. "Quick. She needs an ultrasound, possible miscarriage." Galina's soft face leaned over Irka. "Can you stand? Can you get on that bed okay on your own?"

For the life of her Irka couldn't remember anyone ever asking her if she was okay to do something. Elated and willing to delight this nice woman, she nodded, gathered her strength, swung legs over the edge of the gurney and promptly fell. Three pairs of hands grabbed her, carefully rolling her over. Her

shirt got yanked up. Gorbunov squirted cool jelly on her stomach and pressed a plastic stick to it, swirling it about. Black screen flickered to live. Grainy image crackled lines in tune with occasional beeping. Irka strained to see what they were looking at.

"Yep. Like I thought." Said the doctor, propping up her arms. "I'd say, you're lucky." She looked at Irka. "Ten weeks, by the look of it. You're a strong healthy girl, to survive this. You'll be okay. And the baby will be okay, so don't you worry."

Irka blinked, refusing to accept the information.

Galina sat on the edge of the cot and held her hand. "You didn't know you were pregnant, did you?"

Irka slowly shook her head.

Galina sighed. "Do you know who the father is?"

Irka stared.

"You don't know. How old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen? You can't fool me, you know. People tell you, you look all twenty, am I right?"

Irka nodded, blushing. The doctor's hand felt comforting. This was more loving attention than she ever got from her mother. She clung to Galina's hand, wishing for her to never let go. If being raped meant a stay in the hospital, in the safety of its walls, with a free bed, free food, and free attention

from kind smiling doctors, she'd be raped again, and again, and again. Just for this.

"Why don't you tell me your name?"

Irka took a shuddering breath, then another, her eyes prickling with moisture.

"Can you write it for me?" Galina gave her a blank prescription pad and a pencil. Both slipped out of Irka's shaking hands. She nearly cried from frustration.

"All right. How about this. I'll ask you and just mime to me as much as you can. You a native Moscovite? *Moskvichka*?"

Irka nodded.

"Anyone you can call? Your mother? Your father?"

Irka paused, then shook her head 'no'.

"Tell me what happened, okay? Were you attacked? The man who called the ambulance said you were. Is that true?"

Irka nodded.

And so, slowly, question by question, through Irka's blinking or shrugging or nodding or shaking her head, the doctor pulled out the details of the incident from her, telling her that the baby was just fine, but she'd had to stay in the hospital for a while, to stop the bleeding and to recover, if she wanted to keep it. Or she could do an abortion. She'd still have to stay for a few days, to wait in line, as the hospital was overflowing with patients, free medical care still being the

primary way of serving the population of the newly established Russia. Of course, free meant that *vsem bylo naplevat*, or, in other words, nobody gave a shit. Free also meant you were treated like a cow to be butchered, at best, like a dead dog, at worst.

This woman was different from any doctor Irka has seen. Yes, she had the typical sternness about her, but there was something else too, something reminiscent of genuine warmth.

The image on the screen changed. Broken lines morphed into a clot of something tiny. It was a blob, and it had two miniscule bumps on each side. One of the bumps moved. The blob shifted. Irka's heart went aflutter. It suddenly hit her. It was her baby, a living thing with two little arms, waving at mama, its impossibly little heart beating inside her. For her.

"*Gorbunov!*" Galina called sternly. "She's not supposed to see that! What if she wants to do an abortion? Did you think about that?"

"*Izvinite*, Galina Viktorovna. Sorry." Gorbunov wiped his nose.

Too late, the damage was done. In the past when Irka considered the possibility of being knocked up by Lyosha she hated the sprouting deformity inside her. Now she couldn't stand the idea of killing it. There it was, floating happily, so small and innocent.

I can't do this, thought Irka. It's so small, and I'm so big. How can I do this? How can I yank it out of its warm little house? Dear baby, I promise you, I won't kill you. Please, don't be afraid. I will keep you. I will raise you. I will protect you, you'll see. Anyone who tries to hurt you, mama will show them. Mama will tear them apart for you, mama will. Because mama loves you, always and forever. Tears splashed down her face. She sniffled, overwhelmed.

"See what you did?" Shouted Galina at Gorbunov, who shrunk into his own shoulders. He hastily wiped the patient's stomach.

Irka placed her hands there, hoping to feel something. After mandatory bickering without which no professional talk could be considered being concluded in Russia, Gorbunov left. Galina helped Irka out of the room and into another one across the hall, into an examination chair. She stuck gloved fingers inside her, feeling around. Irka bit her lip to arrest a cry. She was afraid to disappoint this nice lady, afraid to scare her off, obediently succumbing to the collection of a pee sample and the drawing of blood.

Another nurse came in, helped Irka change into an oversized gown starched to the point of hardly bending, and led her to a long room filled with the stink of antiseptic and stale urine, with bed upon bed upon bed, each occupied by a moaning or a snoring or a wheezing patient, all *babushkas*, old women.

Irka dropped on the bed, pulled the cheap hospital blanket to her chin and stuck her head into the pillow. She found a home, at least temporarily. For a few days she'd be okay, and then she'll figure something out. She was sore, in pain and exhausted, but a strange light filled her. She had a purpose now, she had to protect her baby. She'd do anything it took for this baby to never meet her fate. She'd give it as much love as she could. She'd be nothing like her mother, she'd raise the baby by herself, without grubby men, she'd be a proud single mama.

Pavlik's smiling face invaded her thoughts.

Well, maybe not all of them are grubby, thought Irka, struggling to chase the image away. *You just wait, he'll turn out like the rest of them pigs. No good dreaming, no good dreaming about him, stop it, stupid, stop it!* She tossed and turned, unable to sleep.

At last her thoughts drifted to the baby. She wondered if it was a boy or a girl, how she'd name it, how chubby its cheeks would be, how pink. How she'd kiss them every day, something her mother never did. Irka smiled. There, in the dim gloom of a hospital room, with annoying noises and smells all around her, Irka felt happiness. It came from within her, and she decided to fight for it, fight for it to death, with anything she could

find, any weapons, or plain fists, or her teeth, if it came to it. She'd find a way to survive.

Slowly, she sunk into sleep, just as first morning light colored the windows.

Chapter 9. Abortions

A few hours later a new nurse unceremoniously woke Irka and walked her out of the room filled with old *babushkas* to the corridor filled with young *devochkas*. The entire stretch of it was lined with portable beds, each holding a girl Irka's age or younger, some with worried mothers at their side. As Irka learned later, all of them came here for an abortion, a hush-hush business that was done as quickly as possible and wasn't talked about. The higher the bribe, the faster the girls were operated on and discharged. Because, of course, teen pregnancy didn't exist in Russia, it was a disease of the West.

Irka sat on the bed, glancing about. None of the girls would meet her eyes, and some of the mothers openly stared her down, discouraging contact. Every half an hour or so, a fat doctor with a mask over his face would poke his head out of the operation room and call a name. A girl would reluctantly stand and wobble in, to be wheeled out on a gurney thirty minutes later, with an IV trailing behind her in the hands of a nurse. And so it went all day, with the only interruption being a burly *tetka*, a middle-aged woman wheeling about a trolley with

steaming pots, ladling out first breakfast, then lunch, then dinner.

Irka ate everything ravenously, hardly tasting the food. The bland oatmeal porridge, and bread. Thin soup, and bread. Buckwheat with sauce that had sorry lumps of beef in it, and bread. And, of course, compote, the boiled fruit drink, with more bread. She scored extra helpings of it as by the end of the day as *tetka* took a liking to her for staying quiet, as most of the girls either complained, or cried, or behaved like their mothers in a typical dismissive Russian manner.

Irka smiled, overjoyed by being fed and taken care of. Nurses gave her thermometers to take her temperature, pricked her buttocks with syringes, poked her veins with needles, made her swallow tablets, all to not a single protest, which delighted them to no end. Irka soaked up the attention, blossoming. Her story spread fast, albeit tampered with from original Galina's version to a horrendous kidnapping by mafia swine and enslavement into prostitution for a year against her will which ended in a gang rape by thirty on one that she barely survived, crawling onto Red Square in the middle of the day, naked and bloody.

They shook their heads at her, they brought her candy, they gave her toilet paper because everyone was supposed to bring their own toilet paper and Irka had none. Best of all, one of

the nurses gave her a towel and shampoo, and she enjoyed her first real shower in weeks, in a common bathroom smelling of mold but with plenty of hot scalding water.

It was there that the image of Lyosha Ivanenko visited her. He used to take his fill of her in the bathroom if the need flooded him around lunchtime and all other rooms were occupied, mainly on the weekends. Lyosha didn't quite muster the courage of openly doing it in front of Marina unless she was drunk senseless, so into the bathroom they went.

Irka shook her head. It didn't help.

Lyosha's face merged with Roma's, with Sashok's, with faces of the boys who used her not too long ago, with faces of all Marina's past boyfriends. They multiplied, morphed into a spinning circle, grinning, grimacing, laughing their heads off. Irka cried out. Clean and steaming, she doubled down. She wanted to vomit, but it wouldn't come. Her body almost recovered. Instead of nausea, a wave of hate struck her, hate for men and their seed. She balled hands in fists and started pounding on her stomach, her happiness about the baby gone. Her mind flipped from face to face. Oh, how she hated them all, Lyosha in particular. *I can't hurt you back, she thought, but I can hurt your baby. Yes, that's what I'll do, I'll hurt it. It doesn't deserve to live. Babies are supposed to be born of love. This baby will be ugly, because it was born of stinky dirty lust!*

Irka worked herself into a rage, hitting harder and harder. She stomped, slid on the suds and flopped back, smacking the back of her head on the tiled floor.

She came about in bed, reeling, her head exploding.

"*Nu ctho zhe ty tak, ah?* Whatcha doing, huh? Who in their right mind takes a shower without slippers? In the hospital? You've got to wear slippers. Mind you, you'll catch a disease. What's the name. Fungus! It'll eat your feet, nasty parasite. Trust me, I know." An elderly nurse with a puckered face brandished her finger. "You could've killed yourself! Good you have a hard head." She ruffled her hair. "Here for an abortion?"

Irka froze, terrified. She didn't know what to do anymore. Part of her wanted the baby, part of her rejected the very idea of it.

"Listen to me." Whispered the nurse conspiratorially. "Don't do it. Keep it. Take care of it. Your baby is all you've got, *dorogusha*, dearie, by God." She looked around, to make sure nobody heard her. "God gave you the baby. It's God's gift. Have you no shame? Will you throw it away? That baby is your happiness, mark my words. Are you Christened?"

This caught Irka off guard. Having grown up like grass, without any tradition or history or structure in her family, she barely understood religion or God or anything that dealt with

it, having consumed propaganda stories in school for as long as she remembered, not understanding any of them either.

Words like *bolshevik*, *partiya*, *communism* hardly meant anything to her. She dimly recalled being awarded a star badge in first grade and called *oktiabrionok*, little Octobrist. She liked the badge for the golden baby face on it of someone called Lenin, and she liked the word *oktiabrionok* as it reminded her of *tigrionok*, little tiger. Two grades later she took a subway with the rest of her class to a pompously decorated hall full of Soviet flags and Lenin's marble busts, where a red neckerchief was tied around her neck. She had to salute and shout "Vsegda gotov! Always ready!" with the rest of the kids to be proclaimed a poineer. She kept forgetting to wear her neckerchief to school and was scolded every time by the school director.

When Irka turned ten, her great grandmother Nadezhda led her to *Institut Krasoty*, the Institute of Beauty, to pierce her ears as a birthday present. She got her a pair of delicate pinkish gold earrings. Beaming, Irka wore them to school the next day, only to be reprimanded by her teacher, forced to take them out and threatened to be expelled from the Young Pioneer Organization. Irka actually liked the idea, it would've spared her to remember wearing the wretched neckerchief that on top of it had to be ironed, otherwise she was in trouble. She recalled turning into a *komsomolka* at fourteen, a member of Komsomol, a

year earlier than her peers due to the fact that she started school at six and not at seven. It involved wearing a different badge with the same guy's face on it, only much older, and going to boring meetings where Irka largely spaced out.

In the middle of this all, not her mother, nor any other member of her family took her to church, most of which were blown up after the establishment of Soviet Union in 1922, but some still stood. Church visits were discouraged. School propagated atheism. Irka was led to believe only in science. Somehow none of the messages reached her, be it about communism or socialism or atheism or any other ism. The brutality of Marinova household made her hide inside herself. She grew up forming distinctly different opinions about life, which made her believe in her own ass.

Irka knew one simple truth. If she didn't do something, nobody would do it for her, not some old guy sitting in the clouds, like Katya Zorina explained to her God in third grade, and not some guy called Lenin who was dead anyway unless his freaky yellow body displayed in the Mausoleum on Red Square decided to come to life, as Igorek Tkachuk told her, in an exchange for a glimpse of her panties. He fooled her, of course, it wasn't an exciting secret about Styopa, a boy Irka liked, and for that Irka whacked his nose with a fist, which resulted in splats of blood on sticky linoleum floor, a note from the

teacher, a mandatory meeting of Marina Marinova with the school director, and a subsequent beating at home. This incident and many like it only strengthened Irka's belief. There was nobody out there watching out for her, not even angels, like Praskovya Aleksandrovna claimed, Irka's ninth floor neighbor who chatted with the girl occasionally when her mother or grandmother sent her to ask for spare salt or butter or sugar.

"I said, are you Christened?"

Irka startled.

The nurse studied her with an unabashed intensity of old people. "I can see it in your eyes. It's a sin. Sin not to be Christened. Never fear. I'll arrange it for you. I know this one woman—"

The surgeon saved Irka. He called a name, the nurse turned to look, and Irka darted to the bathroom at the end of the hallway as fast as she could, slamming the door behind her and bolting it.

Chapter 10. The Final Decision

Days passed in relative boredom for the rest of the patients, but not for Irka. Ostracized by other girls, she kept to herself. Her excitement changed to agitation to fully blown anxiety. Galina Viktorovna told her that she recovered nicely and it was time to make a decision, to keep the baby or not. She said she went ahead and put Irka on the list, doing her a favor in case she decided to do it. Regardless of her choice, it was her last day at the hospital and the next morning she'd be discharged. That meant Irka had to either go home to her mother, or back to the theater, as she had nowhere else to go.

When *dezhurnaya sestra*, the receptionist nurse, placed a rotary phone on the counter, a piece of paper and a pen, Irka wrote, *I will go by myself*.

"You won't go nowhere by yourself. Doctor gave no permission." Snapped the nurse.

Irka energetically shook her head 'no'.

"*Nu zachem vot eto, ah?* What's this attitude for, huh? Who needs this? I don't need this, busy as it is. The doctor told you how to get better, you need to listen. What is it you want? You want to get out of here alone so you can pass out on the

street and have an ambulance pick you up again? *Znaem my takih.* I'm familiar with your type. Well, *milochka*, lovely, it won't work. We're not a five star hotel for your free vacation here. The doctor said you need to be picked up, and you will be picked up, end of story. Now, I need a name and a number."

Irka hesitated.

"Hurry up." The nurse pursed her lips.

Irka sighed, scribbled on paper and handed it back.

"A theater. You want me to call a theater." Said the nurse, eyebrows sliding up.

Irka nodded. She has never seen this nurse before. The nurses she knew filled workweek shifts and took weekends off.

"*Devochki!* Listen to this. She wants me to call the theater." The nurse laughed heartily, to jeers from a group of women in white coats drinking tea in the *ordinatorskaya* room, where doctors and nurses where typically either working on patients' histories, or taking a break and sharing latest gossip, which ended up occupying most of their time.

"Who will pick you up from the theater, Terekhova herself?" She laughed more. Irka blushed. Although Lyosha claimed the TV, she snuck in some watching time here and there, her favorite movie being *d'Artagnan and Three Musketeers*, where Terekhova, a famous film actress, played *Milady the Winter*. Irka blushed even more thinking about *d'Artagnan*. This is where her obsession with

dark curly hair started. She fell in love with Mikhail Boyarsky, the actor who played him, when she saw the movie for the first time in third grade. He was so brave, so gallant, so aristocratic. Pavlik looked very much like him, his hair especially.

"*Posledniy raz sprashivayu.* This is the last time I'm asking. We're busy here, haven't you noticed? So don't even think of playing a joke on me. You want me to call the theater or not?" Said the nurse shrilly.

Irka nodded, hoping that maybe Faina Ilinichna was there.

The nurse slammed a phonebook, thumbed through it, mumbling, found what she was looking for and rolled the disk seven times, listening to the ring tone.

"*Alyo, teatr?* Hello, theater? I have a girl here..." She scanned the papers. "Irina Marinova."

Irka listened with abated breath.

"No, it's a hospital. Yes." The nurse tapped a rhythm with a pen on the counter.

"I don't know. How would I know, *zhenshina?* Woman, I see her for the first time in my life." She paused the tapping. "Uh-uh. Yes. Well, what do you want me to do about it? Somebody has to come and get her, we're overflowing as it is." She frowned. "No, I said. She asked me to call you." She listened some more.

"Well, decide faster, I haven't got all day." The nurse threw Irka an impatient look.

Irka's insides twisted.

"Tomorrow morning, yes. Ten at the latest." Tap=tap. "I need a name. Who? Aha..." She wrote something down. "Tell him to take his passport. We don't just give out people to strangers here. Where?" The nurse gave out the clinic's address, the ward's name, the floor number, and slammed the receiver. "Who is Pavel Boim? Your father?"

Irka stiffened, shaking her head 'no'.

"Brother then?"

Irka gulped. The name didn't immediately connect in her mind with Pavlik. Blood rushed to her head. *Pavlik is coming to pick me up? Really?*

"*Smotri-ka, vsya pokrasnela.* Look at you blushing like a school girl." The nurse winked and leaned over the counter, suddenly all smiles. "Is he your boyfriend? An actor? Always wanted to date an actor. Is he cute?"

Irka positively turned red like a tomato. In her opinion Pavlik was the height of perfection. Cute offended his beauty. Dogs were cute, Pavlik was gorgeous, like all actors were supposed to be.

The nurse gave a short whistle. "*Tak vot kto otec.* *Poklonnicy to nebos revnuyut?* So this is who the father is. Are

his fans jealous of you? There are other girls, aren't there? I bet there are. Must be true love, if an actor went for one like you." She scanned Irka in a way one would look at a toad.

Irka's palms turned sweaty.

Like birds lured by breadcrumbs, first one nurse, then another filed out of the room, eager to hear the latest gossip about a fat teen knocked up by an actor.

"How old is he?" Pressed on the nurse. "No. Don't tell me he's a grandpa. Tatyana, heard of Pavel Boim? An actor?"

"Nah." Tatyana answered, lazily chewing gum. "Get me. What you need him for?"

"This beauty got pregnant by him. He's coming to get her. She wouldn't give me her parents number, bet they've no idea."

"You don't say." Tatyana ogled the girl, blew a bubble and popped it. "*Etu tolstuyu duryndu?* This plump stupid thing?"

The first nurse sniggered.

"*Nu ladno vam, prekratite!* Cut it out, gals, stop it! You're scaring her." Chimed in the third nurse, thin as a rail. "Leave her alone, can't you see she's about to cry? You're like vultures. Give you a mouse, you won't blink twice before snatching it. She was raped by mafia guys, two years straight, every day," she added in a whisper, "Natasha said."

Speechless, nurses looked at each other, then at Irka.

Mortified, she took a step back.

"Marinova!" A raspy voice echoed across the hall. It belonged to another surgeon, a squat and athletic man, his build more suitable for a boxing ring than a hospital.

Irka's heart jumped out of her chest.

"*Nu che stoish? Idi.* Whatcha standing? Go." Urged her the nurses. "Get rid of it."

Gown crinkling, borrowed slippers squelching, Irka darted to the middle of the hall and stopped, caught on the edge of indecision. All eyes were on her. The girls from the beds stared, as did the nurses, as did the visitors with sacks of fruit and chocolate candy reserved for doctor bribes. The surgeon stared too, tapping his foot impatiently.

"Marinova? Anyone?" He shouted again, searching the hall and singling out Irka. "Are you Marinova?"

Before she could nod, the girl closest to him answered, pointing. "That's her. She doesn't talk, so no use asking her."

Irka wished to fall through the floor. She couldn't take a step back, couldn't take a step forward. *What should I do? What should I do? What should I do?* She screamed inside her head. She thought about Lyosha, about how hideous his baby might be, then about her mother, cringing at the idea of coming home with a newborn, smack into the violent existence of their household. No, she shouldn't have it. Then she thought of the image she saw on the screen, little blimp with moving arms. She thought about

Pavlik. What if he loved her? What if he married her? What if his parents were well off and had a large flat where they could live together? Or maybe he made enough money as an actor and had his own flat? Actors were rich, weren't they? Irka grew up with the idea that everyone in Soviet Union was equal. But it wasn't Soviet Union anymore, was it?

Irka rarely dared to dream, to imagine some unattainable perfect future, afraid that it might overtake her logical reasoning, which is exactly what happened now.

"Marinova, how long do you want me to wait for? You coming or not?" Said the surgeon, irritated.

Fear enveloped Irka, not fear of metal tools that she glimpsed on the operating table, but fear for what was inside her. She pictured the baby cut out and thrown away like a newborn puppy her grandmother killed in a bucket of water. Irka's stomach twitched. She couldn't possibly feel quickening at ten weeks, but she didn't know that. She thought the baby got scared. Shame flooded her, shame for nearly breaking her promise. What kind of a mother told her baby she'd keep it and then change her mind like its life *ne stoila vyedennogo yayca*, wasn't worth an empty eggshell? Marina Marinova never kept her word, lying left and right. Irka hated that, and yet she turned out to be just like that sorry *pyahnitsa*, drunkie, lying to her own child.

I'm so sorry, little baby, I didn't mean that. I will never hurt you, never. I will only love you. I will love you with the whole of my heart. I will be a good mama to you, a mama you can be proud of. I promise. And with that, she shook her head 'no' and ran off, staggering along the clinic corridors to where legs would carry her.

That night she took out her diary for the first time since running away from home and wrote a new entry.

September 12th, 1993. Sunday.

Dear diary, I'm going to have a baby.

Chapter 11. The Hospital Visit

Irka barely slept, leaping to her feet at dawn, taking a shower, combing her hair with a borrowed brush, changing into a spare set of clothes, and then sitting on the made up bed, ready two hours early, staring at the clock, waiting for it to strike ten. Nurses made their first morning round, barked directions, gave out pills and thermometers. *Tetka* plowed by, handing out steaming *kasha*, watery cream of wheat by the look of it. Irka poked in it with a spoon and took small nibbles of bread, jumping at every noise.

Groans, moans, talk and shouts filled the hall, a typical Monday morning. Monday also meant Galina Viktorovna returned to her shift. She spotted Irka on a routine patient visit and sat next to her, holding her hand. "Good morning, Irina. How are we feeling today?"

Irka beamed, patting her stomach.

"*Horosho*? Good? I'm happy for you." She sighed. "So you decided to keep the baby?"

Irka nodded, smiling from ear to ear.

"Well. If that's what you decided, then stick to it. Life is such a thing, devil barely knows, what's good for you, what's

bad for you? *I* think this baby will do you good. It'll make you grow up, make you mature." Galina sort of shrunk a little. "*Nu ladno*. Okay, enough of it." She assumed what she thought was a professional demeanor. Brows furrowed, lips pursed. "I knew you'd keep it. Course you would. It's hard not to, isn't it, after seeing it move about?" She slapped her knees and stood up.

Irka sagged, reaching for the doctor's soft hand. She would miss her, miss her touch, miss her words.

"*Nu hvatit, prekrati. Vozmi sebya v ruki*. Enough. Get a grip. You're a mother or not? Is there someone who could help you raise it? Mama? *Babushka*?"

Irka blinked.

"Someone picking you up? *Dezhurnaya sestra* said she called a theater..."

Right on cue, the door on the opposite end of the hall opened, letting in cool autumn air, to loud displeasure of those close to it. Irka perked up, heart drumming.

The doctor followed her gaze.

Two young men strolled between portable beds, one in a clearly Western made windbreaker, hair smoothed back, another in a wool coat, blond mane flapping in rhythm to his steps, echoing loudly. Evidently, they came from the door hardly used, having either climbed the stairs or used the balcony for smoking. It was quite an entrance. Immediately, chatter ceased. Mouths

opened, gaping. In another second, whispers erupted, rustling along the walls as if carried by the wind.

All kinds of people came to pick up their loved ones, family men in old suits, *babushkas* with children bundled up in hats and snow pants as if it was winter already, young women on ultra-heels with ultra-makeup that blinded instantly, swaying *pyahnitsas*, or drunks, usually accompanied by loud excuses, packs of older women, single lone women, women in *shubas*, or fur coats, women in wool coats, women in hats, women in kerchiefs, women, women, women. It was mostly women picking up women, mothers picking up daughters, seldom daughters picking up mothers, from the Gynecology Ward located on the eighth floor of the clinic. Men were a rarity, sober men were a greater rarity. Sober young handsome men was a miracle unheard of, as hospital business, child birth business, and, in general, medical care business in Russia fell chiefly on the shoulders of women, both in clinic personnel and in family members taking over after the patient went home. There were some male doctors, but few and in between. Men chiefly took on security jobs which involved idle sitting in a creaky chair behind an unsightly desk by an equally unsightly door, taking in bribes from those who wanted to visit patients outside of regular hours, some going as far as staying to sleep in the hospital, staff turning a blind eye to it.

In Russia, you could bribe your way to anything, if you knew the right currency, the right amount, and the right people, were born into the right family, had relatives in high places, or, if you happened to be a sweet looking young lady with a simple outlook on life, such as, you didn't complicate business relationships by thinking that your body belonged to you and to you only. On the other hand, in certain circles, sweet looking young men were in higher demand, but then again, *golubye*, or gays, didn't exist in Russia. In your case you've forgotten, it was, together with teen pregnancy, a despicable disease of the West.

Irka quivered in anticipation.

Pavlik! With Kostik... What does it mean? Do they both like me? Or did they come together as friends?

Pavlik strolled up first, preceded by a cloud of expensive aroma. Kostik sauntered up behind him, stopping at a considerable distance and looking out of place, his expression displaying zero desire to be here.

"*Zdravstvuyte*. Good afternoon. My name is Pavel Boim." He stretched out a hand, the doctor shook it. "And this is Konstantin Livchev."

Kostik nodded his head ever so slightly without a word.

"We came to pick up Irina Marinova."

"Aha! *Ochen priyatno*. Nice to meet you, and good afternoon to you too, *rebyata*, boys." The doctor shook Pavlik's hand. Galina Victorovna. Your...?" She swiveled eyes at Irka.

"...friend's..."

"...friend's doctor. She's one lucky girl, to survive what she survived. Somebody needs to take care of her, you know, good care, of her and her future baby." She twiddled her fingers, studying first Pavlik, then Kostik, who ignored what was happening around him, staring out the window.

"Yes, I understand. Of course." Said Pavlik.

"*Nu, prinimayte devushku*. Well, here she is for you. Good as new." Said Galina, stepping up to Kostik. "Who would you boys be? Relatives."

"I don't know her. I'm with Pavel." Kostik threw impatiently.

"We work together, in the theater." Said Pavlik.

"Ah, how interesting. And what does Irina do?"

"She's... my makeup artist."

Irka perked up, puzzled, first looking at her hands, then at Pavlik.

He gave her a half-smile.

"*Nu vse uzhe, poidem, ah?* Are we done here? Can we go?" Said Kostik, glaring.

"Listen, I'm eternally grateful that you came, I really am." Pavlik said quietly, and added. "Irina, Konstantin Livchev is my dear friend. I don't believe I have introduced you officially, I'm truly sorry. I mean, I know you've seen him perform and you know who he is, but that doesn't excuse the fact that I neglected to make an appropriate introduction. I should have. My sincere apologies." He spoke with such sophistication, that Irka only gaped, in disbelief that people like that existed. Pavlik represented an otherworldly style of life to her, which until recently was beyond the grasp of her imagination. And yet, there he stood, patiently waiting for her reaction.

"I thought you said she doesn't talk? Don't see why you waste your breath. Besides, rehearsal is in a couple hours, don't want to be late. Remember what Sim said." Kostik flipped his hair, looking out the window again, boredom scarring his features.

Irka still gaped at Pavlik.

"Irina, you're probably wondering why we came to pick you up, what, with us hardly knowing you." It's as if he read her mind.

She nodded and closed her mouth.

"Ilinichna told us. We were on our way out when the clinic called. I told Kostik, well, because he has a car, and I don't. So we thought—"

"You thought." Corrected him Kostik.

"I'm sorry. *I* thought. I thought we'd help." Sighed Pavlik. "Ilinichna told me a bit about you. Not much, but she thinks there's a reason you ran away from home, an important one, if you didn't call them and called the theater instead. Am I right?"

Irka hardly believed her ears. Even if she could talk, she still wouldn't be able to articulate her thoughts as eloquently.

"May I ask why you got here in the first place? What happened?"

Galina Viktorovna bristled. "Pavel, is it? There is really no easy way to say this. Can I have a minute with you?" She pulled him aside.

Kostik frowned, flitting his hair impatiently.

Irka waited, trying to read their expressions. The doctor lectured Pavlik, one soft hand on his shoulder, his face slowly draining color.

Meanwhile, nurses' voices took on a new boldness. They openly discussed why would two amazing specimen of such stature, and not just anybody but two *actors*, be interested in that mute fatty, *tolstushka*. What did they find in her? They shared their

doubts intermingled with snickering. Lack of privacy in the hospital, which was typical for any Russian medical institution, resulted in familial affairs being put on display for everyone to see and discuss. Free localized entertainment, if you will.

Pavlik motioned to Kostik, who reluctantly joined them.

Unable to contain her curiosity any longer, the nurse called on Pavel Boim, asking him if he brought his passport and could she see it right away because she hasn't got all day to discharge patients, she had other things to do. Two nurses behind her made themselves look busy, occasionally throwing hungry glances at the boys. Irka shuffled up, watching the commotion. Galina gave her last instructions on how to watch her health, then relayed the same to Pavlik who listened politely, taking back his passport.

"*Spasibo*. Thank you. Will do." He said.

"Can't put a 'thank you' in a pocket, can I?" Galina said bitterly, eyeing him up and down. "You take care of yourself." She threw to Irka and stalked off, her figure wobbling under the starched coat.

"I told you. You should've brought something." Hissed Kostik. "You forgot, as always."

Pavlik shrugged. "You suddenly care?"

Kostik spun around and began walking.

Irka blushed. She had nothing. She's seen the staff pocket all kinds of things brought by willing relatives to soften their demeanor towards patients, from boxes of chocolates to bottles of vodka to plain bundles of cash.

The nurse pushed a paper toward Irka. She signed it, got her passport, handed back borrowed slippers, brush, robe, remaining toilet paper, grabbed her backpack, and they were off. Pavlik offered an arm for her to lean on. Envious stares followed them.

Irka plunged in heaven, worries forgotten. She didn't walk, she floated, barely present, finding herself led to the elevator, out of the building and into a new smelling car, something definitely not of Russian make, windows tinted, pleasant music issuing from the speakers, Pavlik sitting next to her and Kostik starting the engine.

Chapter 12. The Uncertain Future

It took Pavlik several times to repeat to Irka why they were going back to the theater, for her to register the meaning of his words. All she could see were his moving lips, his eyes, a lock of his curly hair. All she heard was the drumming of her heart. At last she processed his apology for not being able to arrange anything better. He asked her if it was okay or if she wanted to be dropped off somewhere else. He expressed his concern over her wellbeing in case she had to use Moscow Metro. He asked again. Irka blinked. She couldn't talk! Nobody asked her for an opinion, she just drifted along whatever life threw at her, doing her best and shutting herself down to survive.

Pavlik waited patiently for some response. Irka tried to concentrate to think straight, but there were simply too many distractions. She's never been in a fancy car before. Her mother didn't own one, nor did anyone in the family. Some of the passing boyfriends had a sad looking *Zhiguli* or a *Zaporozhec*, a joke of a car, really, nicknamed *mylnica*, a soapbox. A couple times Irka scored a ride in a taxi, a yellow *Volga* with stinky interior.

This though, this was different. This reeked of money.

This was too good to be true.

At last Pavlik succeeded in catching her attention by holding one of her hands. She tensed, but didn't pull away. It felt comfortable. "You're probably wondering why we—"

Kostik threw a venomous look into the back mirror.

"Why *I'm* helping you," corrected himself Pavlik, "although Kostik is providing a tremendous help by offering us a ride."

"Thank *him*, not me." Said Kostik to Irka's questioning glance, rolled down the window, lighted a cigarette, and took a deep drag.

City noises drifted in. Cool wind brushed Irka's face.

Pavlik searched her eyes. "I had a sister, an older sister. She was killed last year. You..." He drifted off.

Irka squeezed his hand just a little bit.

"You remind me of her, with your... silence." He said at last. "She was like you, the silent type, you know? One of those." He looked at the girl and through her at the same time.

Is that what it is? Thought Irka. Her stomach clenched. *You like me because I remind you of your dead sister?* Her shoulders drooped, and she let out a long sigh.

"It's not what you think it is, no, not like that." Said Pavlik hastily. "It's much more complicated."

Kostik coughed and threw back a glance of almost painful irritation. Pavlik looked at him briefly. Irka turned rigid.

Something strange went on between these two, some hidden dynamic. Trained to recognize the smallest body language signs, she thought, *it's like Kostik is trying to act egotistic on purpose, like maybe Pavlik owes him something.* She thought back to the theater cafeteria and to rehearsals, where Sim clearly singled out one boy over another. *Is he Sim's favorite, is that what it is? He's giving him better acting roles, paying him more money? What kind of a name is Sim anyway? Stage name, I think what they call it. Weird.* Irka had no idea how actors were paid, but clearly these two were paid plenty. *That must be it. It's either career, or fame, or money.* She thought about her mother, about what she'd do for money, or, rather, about how there wasn't anything Marina Marinova wouldn't do if you waved a pack of rubles over her face. Irka shuddered, both homesick and disgusted.

"Ilinichna and I... well." Continued Pavlik. "She helped me a lot this year. A *lot*. She's lost her daughter to a car accident. You know about it, right? She tells everyone."

Irka nodded.

"Makes you feel so small, so insignificant, when you lose someone. It's unreal. One minute they're there, and another... So Ilinichna knew what I was going through. She said many good things about you, by the way." Pavlik smiled.

"You're aware of what Sim will think about this if he sees us, right?" Said Kostik, letting out a stream of smoke.

"I already told him." Said Pavlik.

"You *told* him? When?" Kostik slammed on the breaks. They lurched forward, none of them buckled. The tires screeched, coming to a stop right over the zebra crossing. An old woman, walking by with a cane, lifted it and hit the car's hood. Kostik stuck out his head and covered her in an abundance of exceptionally delivered profanities, honking for an added effect. "*Staraya kurva!* Old cunt! Look what she did to my car!" He smashed the cigarette, threw it out and pressed on gas. The car jerked forward.

"There is nothing there, not a scratch. It's just a car, Kostik. Relax." Said Pavlik, holding on to the seat. "I would appreciate it if you slowed down a little."

"What do you mean, just a car? It's brand-fucking new!"

"I'm sure your dad will buy you another one if you total this one." Said Pavlik calmly, steel creeping into his voice.

Irka sensed an oncoming storm.

Kostik slowly turned around, one hand on the wheel, eyes off the road.

"What are you doing? You'll get us killed!" Erupted Pavlik.

"So what? Aren't you sick of this? This life of pretense? Personally, I'm sick of it. No offense, *malyshka*, baby, not

about you. I simply have too much on my mind right now." He said to Irka. "Listen, dear *Pavlusha* Pavlik-love. Personally—"

A wave of nausea hit Irka, she dry-heaved.

"Not on the seat, *dura!*" Shrieked Kostik and turned to face the road just in time. They started drifting into the opposite lane.

"Don't call her *dura!*" Snapped Pavlik.

A milk truck blared at them, veering to the side. Kostik righted the car at the last moment and pulled to the curb, eyes ablaze. "That was fun. There, *malyshka*, open the door, do it there, please."

Like an obedient puppet, Irka obliged, coughing into the road. Nothing came, only an echo of sour bile.

"Remember how those gang bosses died?" Said Kostik gleefully.

"Yes, I remember, and I don't need you to remind me." Said Pavlik, letting go of Irka's hand. She reached out for it and grabbed it. Pavlik peered at her interestedly, but didn't take his hand away. Irka couldn't quite read him. There was a mixture of sadness in his eyes, sadness and something else. Could it be love? She didn't know.

"I'm sorry about... what happened to you." He said.

"Shut up, love birds. It's my story time. *My.*" Kostik started a new cigarette and spread his arms across the seats.

"So those idiots were driving on this one lane country road, closing on each other. They is this thing they have about power. Whoever yields, loses respect. What do they do? They drive on, fuckheads, they accelerate. Neither budges, then, BAM! They crash head-on and exploded. You know why?"

"You asked me before and I gave you an aswer already." Said Pavlik patiently.

"Because each of them thought the other would yield, numbnuts. That's what I'm tired off, yielding." Kostik spit on the road and threw the stub into it, watching it hiss.

"I'm sorry if it is my fault, or if you think it's my fault." Said Pavlik, looking at his watch. "We're late."

"*Tchert!* Shit!" Kostik turned on the ignition. "Are you done? Please don't do it in here, I'm asking you nicely." That was addressed to Irka, who nodded. The urge passed. Apart from residual soreness below her stomach, she did indeed feel fine.

They sped off, along the boulevard blocked with traffic, then on the boulevard's shoulder, breaking every possible rule, a line of cars behind them doing the same.

At last, they turned into the familiar arch off Tveskaya.

"I asked the director, you know, Sim Novy, and it's okay with him. You can sleep in my dressing room for a while. Until you figure out what to do next." Whispered Pavlik. "Him, and... Konkin, the theater manager, they're... not exactly friends. You

can't sleep where you slept before. Here. I made you a spare. Key to my room." He pressed a small golden thing into her palm and folded it closed.

Irka felt as though Pavlik gave her the key to his heart. She suddenly got herself lost in him. She didn't know what it was, his manners, his politeness, his gentleness, or his dazzling beauty, but right there and then, ashamed of her plain jacket in contrast to his fashionable windbreaker, sitting in the back of an expensive car in the gloom of tinted windows, she fell in love with Pavlik, as easily as one slips into a dream, a dream full of things she never had before, a dream that became real, because who said that for once in her life she couldn't get lucky?

Chapter 13. The Hidden Talent

One week stretched into two stretched into three. October came, and with it sharp winds and the smell of rain. Faina Ilinichna took upon feeding Irka to fatten her up, excited about the baby as if it was her own. Pavlik let her experiment with makeup and once she did a job decent enough so that he went onstage with it. Konkin pretended like she didn't exist, leaving her pay with Ilinichna. Irka didn't know whom to thank for that. News of the janitor girl being pregnant spread fast. Actors who wouldn't look at her twice suddenly were saying hello and bringing her candy or cookies. Even director himself expressed interest, bumping into the trio one night.

"Vot oni, moi sladkie popki! Why, there they are, my sweet asses! Delicious, delicious." Boomed Sim's voice. He floated to the stage, where Irka mopped, listening to Pavlik's news of the day, while sulky Kostik urged his friend to cut it and leave, afraid they'll be late for the party of so-and-so where drinks and entertainment promised to be outrageous even by Moscow standards. *"Tak eto budet Irinka,* so this would be Irinka everyone is talking about?" He jabbed a finger at the girl as if he just saw her for the first time.

Pavlik opened his mouth, but Kostik was first, speaking with flair. "Sim! What a surprise. We thought you left already." He laughed nervously. "Allow me. May I present to you, Irina Marinova, the mute janitor girl with a belly bearing a fruit of the unknown origin, latest theater attraction." He bowed theatrically. It was Kostik Irka only witnessed in the presence of the director, lately trying especially hard for any shred of a compliment from him.

Sim's face turned sour. "*Ty by tak v spektakle igray, I wish you'd perform like this in the play, malchik moy, my boy.* My ears shriveled up and fell off at your lines today."

Kostik balked. "They did?"

"He's sick, Sim," said Pavlik, "getting over a cold."

"Spare me your pity." Snapped Kostik.

"Please, don't mind him. He's... Kostik, are you all right?" Pavlik threw a mortified look at his friend who turned pale, stomped offstage and pounded up the stairs. A moment later they heard a door slam.

Sim stroked his silk neckerchief. "*Kakoy obidchivy, odnako.* Rather pissed off, is he? You, sugardoll. What do you think? What pussy acted better, Pavlik boy or Kostik boy?" He peered at Irka, waiting for an answer.

She froze. After working in the theater for almost a month, she still couldn't get used to Sim's mannerisms and speech,

peppered with phrases that evolved chiefly around female sexual organs applied to describing anything male, be it actors themselves, their performances, or their appearances. Sim was fond of ridiculing the way they dressed, the way their hair looked, the way they presented themselves, daily calling them lazy cock pockets not worthy to be included in his troupe. Irka heard her share of Russian Mat at home. Strong obscenities replaced most of her family's communications. This was something else. Sim applied profanities in such a twisted and creative way that Irka startled each time, staring. And so she stood now, taut, expecting him to grab her tits, or buttocks, or both, especially after a comment about pussies.

Sim did neither. He walked around her with a face of one avoiding a contagious disease. "*Nu chto eto takoe. Nu v chem ty odeti?* What is this? Who dresses like this? You will make my dick fall off, lovely Irinochka, you're in the presence of art. You are contaminating the very walls of this sacred place with your appearance, do you understand what I mean?" He spread his arms and peered at Irka.

Irka glanced at Pavlik, horrified.

"Sim, Irina—" He began.

"I know, I know. So I heard. She has a face, doesn't she? She can act. She has arm and legs, as far as I can see. Don't you, Irinochka pussy-bird?"

Irka nodded, struggling to envision a bird with a pussy.

"*Otlichno*. Excellent. Show me." He raised his voice so it rolled across the auditorium. "Show me what you can do. Convince me you can act, and I might do something nice for you, fanny sweetness." He winked at Pavlik, whose face spread into a grin.

Last week he ran back to his dressing room to retrieve a forgotten bag and stumbled upon Irka miming out an act onstage, sweating in effort, spreading her arms, hitching her legs, and overall attempting to appear taller, thinner, and infinitely more charming than she thought she was.

Pavlik hid behind the curtain to watch for a while, then surprised her, running out.

Irka nearly fell over from freight. She turned red and tried to slink away, but Pavlik caught her hand and, holding it gently, promised to talk to Sim, to see if maybe her could give her a silent role in one of the productions.

Irka couldn't sleep that night, fingering the blanket Ilinichna gave her, staring at Pavlik's costumes glistening in the dark, dreaming about becoming an actress one day, wearing stunning dresses, elaborate hairdos, and exquisite shoes. That was not all of it, of course. More than anything, she dreamed she'd have her voice back. She would be able to talk again, delivering speeches of such beauty, everyone in the audience would weep and leap to their feet to applaud. She'd come to the

edge of the stage, she'd bow. Pavlik would be at her side, he would hold her hand, he would look at her, he would lean closer, and then he would...

"Irinochka, sissy-bun. I'm waiting." Sim took a seat in the audience, gesturing at her to start.

Irka thought she'd die from stage freight. Her throat went dry, everything inside her collapsed and frosted over. But Irka was good at forcing herself do things. Since she could hold a *venik*, or broom, she forced herself to clean, to organize, to wash, to fold, to keep her hands busy no matter how much pain she was in, to survive, to keep moving, to keep living. It was her way of showing power. No matter what anyone did to her she never uttered a cry, not since Marina threw her across the room after she said her first word, *dura*.

Irka threw the mop to the floor with stubborn determination. She stared at the balcony above the parterre, took one step, then another, and another. The world ceased to exist. All she saw was a hanging drunken face of Lyosha Ivanenko. She raised a fist and punched it. It felt good. She punched it again, hard. She slapped it. She took another step and wiped out of her vision so violently, her sizeable buttocks careened over and she nearly fell offstage, caught last second by Pavlik from behind. He was about to say something, but Sim interrupted.

"*Molchat! Eshe, eshe!* Silent! More! More! I want more! Give me more emotion, more punch, more splendor! I want to see you kill it! Kill it, *sladkaya popka*, sugar bum, kill it!" He nearly jumped out of his pants from excitement.

Irka rarely let out her emotions to the full extent. It's like somebody opened a faucet, and everything and splashed and gurgled. She staggered about the stage, imagining her drunken mother, her ignorant grandmother, her sick great grandmother, giving each a piece of her mind. She went on to converse with Sonya, little Lenchka, and all Marinova household pets, two dogs, three cats, a rat and a hedgehog. The imaginary hedgehog she kicked with immense satisfaction, because it couldn't bite her back. After what must have been an hour, or so it seemed to Irka, she bent out of breath, clutching her belly. It hurt. Then the air began to crackle. Irka didn't understand at first what she heard, thinking it some kind of an explosion.

It was Sim. He was standing, and he was clapping, and he was shouting. "Bravo! Bravo! Unprecedented talent! Brilliance delivered without a single word! Learn, *moy malchik*, learn! The ferocity! The intensity! Where were you hiding, hussy-love? How dare you not have presented yourself to me sooner! Why didn't you tell me, Pavlusha?"

"I-I didn't—" Pavlik stammered.

"Too bad you're pregnant, *vkusnaya koshechka*, yummy pussycat." Suddenly said Sim, deflating. "What are we going to do with your belly, tell me? Blast you, darling. I can't make a costume grow with you, can I now."

"Sim Ignatievich..." Began Pavlik.

"Shhh! I'm thinking." Sim raised one hand, caressing his chin.

"See? I told you you'd do well. Congratulations." Whispered Pavlik into Irka's ear.

She stood, dumbstruck. *Me? Talent? But I didn't say a single word. I didn't even—*

Somebody yanked on the curtain.

Kostik burst onstage, face stained with tears.

"What is this shit? You're auditioning this cow when you tell me you have no time for me? Is this how you pay me? What about your promises, huh? We're going to America? I will make you a star? I will—"

"Kostik, please, don't." Said Pavlik pleadingly.

"Shut up!"

"*Zachem ty tak?* Why? What did I do wrong?" Pavlik reached out.

"Shut your trap, I said! I'm talking to Sim. Sim, answer me. Answer me, please. Do I mean anything to you? Were your

words for nothing? Please..." His voice broke. He fell to his knees and began crawling forward. It was a sorry sight.

Sim's face expressed revulsion. He watched the actor squirm, saying nothing.

"I'll do anything for you, anything you want, you know that." Continued Kostik, sobbing. "Anything at all. Just ask. All you have to do is ask. You know how I feel—"

Irka thought Pavlik's hair stood on end, such was his expression. He darted to Kostik, tackled him, and put a hand over his mouth.

"Rehearsing. After hours." Konkin's gaunt shape appeared by the back row. As the theater manager, he inspected the building every night before locking it up.

Irka jumped, starting to tremble.

Konkin threw her a poisonous look and grinned.

"*Tishe!* Silent! I can't stand theater stuff interruptions, have I not said it a million times? I don't go for that tone of voice you're using in my presence nor do I care much about before hours, or after hours, or whatever the fuck hours. Best you get out." Said Sim over his shoulder.

"Can't get out until the theater is closed, can I?" Called Konkin stubbornly. "Just doing my job like everybody else. Come tomorrow morning, why don't you. It's late. I want to get home,

pour me a stiff drink, relax. But no, you people have no respect for rules."

"Fuck rules!" Cried Sim. He looked scary, breathing like a mountain in rage. "It's because of narrow-minded morons like you that artists suffer. Pitiful slimy worms with not an iota of appreciation for genius. Nothing is worth shit to you if you can't buy with it a bucket of cheap vodka. There's no such thing as after hours when you create." He shouted now. "Art is divine! Art is above time, above eternity itself! You are interrupting creation with your pitiful demands on schedule, but do you care? Of course you don't, you have no mechanism for appreciation of true workmanship because all you seek is to destroy. And if you dare touching this girl again with your filthy paws, I will personally see to it that you get fired. Now, get out of my sight."

Irka gasped, glancing at Pavlik.

Pavlik looked away.

"He boasted about it, the slime that he is." Said Kostik suddenly. "Naturally, my dear friend had to intrude. He simply couldn't let it continue happening without appropriate consequences that would teach the slime his lesson, could you?"

Pavlik sighed, helping Kostik up.

"Out, I said. Are you deaf? OUT!" Bellowed Sim.

Konkin left, muttering curses.

"No matter." Sim threw his arms in the air. "It's gone. The inspiration is gone. Poof! Just like that, stomped into nothing. By whom? By a swine. As always. I don't know what's keeping here, I really don't know." He eased out of his neckerchief. "Let's get Kostik home, Pavlusha, and have us a little talk."

He asked him to help me. Thought Irka. He must love me, he must. He's just too shy to tell me in person. One day he will, I'm sure of it. I just have to wait. Good things come to those who wait.

If Irka thought she loved Pavlik before, now she felt devoted to him, obsessively, painfully, blindly. She didn't care much for Kostik, but Kostik was Pavlik's friend, and that was good enough. Burning to express her gratitude, she rushed over to help him up, to brush off his clothes, and then helplessly watched them leave, Sim holding up Kostik on one side, Pavlik on another, Kostik sniffing into Sim's shoulder.

Pavlik turned and waved apologetically. "*Prosti*. Forgive me. I have to go. I'll be early tomorrow for practice."

Overjoyed, Irka nodded and disappeared into his dressing room for what would be her last night at the theater.

Chapter 14. Black October

The next morning the theater was ominously quiet. Irka woke with a start. She overslept. She got dressed, washed her face over the restroom sink, and went to get the broom when the phone rung upstairs. It trilled and trilled. Ilinichna usually picked it up right away. Irka frowned, looking at the clock. It was way past eight. Her heart pounded. Sim's new play premiered tonight. Pavlik had a leading role in it. He said he'd come early to practice. He should've been here by now. Irka put the broom down and went upstairs, a bad feeling spreading over her.

Now she stood by the booth, looking at a steaming cup of tea, half a cookie, and no sign of Ilinichna. The door was ajar. Having not left the building since she came from the hospital, Irka cautiously peered out. Ilinichna stood by the porch, talking to some woman with *avoska*, a net shopping bag full of empty beer bottles. Both women gasped now and then, producing noises like those of squeaky toys full of water. Ilinichna spotted Irka, waved the woman off and shuffled up the steps, breathing hard.

"Gospodi bozhe ty moy, gospodi, dozhila to! Oh my God, oh my God, what's happening, what's happening!" She muttered. "Get

inside. Don't go anywhere today. Not in your condition, you'll lose the baby. I said, get in!" She shooed the girl.

Irka's skin crawled. It was one of those moments when she wished she could speak, could ask what was going on, and couldn't. She blocked Ilinichna's way.

"What? What are you looking at? Devil take them all. Oh God, oh God. I told you about them hooligans on the street, didn't I? Young, old, no matter. Idiots, all of them, don't get beaten enough, they didn't. If it were me, I'd give them some belt, oh, I'd give the president some good belt, on his bare *zadnica*. *Tanki v Moscve, bombyat Bely Dom! Sovsem s uma soshli*. Tanks in Moscow, firing at the White House. They've all gone crazy. Stalin would've sorted it out in no time. Would've sent them all to a prison camp and that'd be the end of it."

Irka wanted to scream. *What do you mean, firing? Is it war? Who's firing? At whom? For what?* She felt nausea well up.

The phone trilled again. Ilinichna, huffing and puffing, moved the girl aside and staggered inside in time to pick up the receiver.

"*Alyo? Da. Da.* Yes. Yes. What? Who? Oh my God. Oh my God." She sunk into the chair, hand on her heart. Her face has gone grey, her glasses slid. She didn't bother pushing them up, listening.

Irka paced, unable to stand in one place. By this time Pavlik should've definitely showed up. He was never late, never. Something happened. She groaned, helpless.

"No, he's not here yet." Mumbled Ilinichna into the phone.
"Pavlik? Not here either."

Irka tapped Ilinichna on the shoulder. The woman rudely waved her off.

Irka bit on a finger. Facts swirled in her head, falling into place. The White House. That's where the government sat. Pavlik said he lived by the White House, in one of those *mnogoetazhkas*, multistory apartment buildings. It took him a few metro stations to get to the theater, but on good days he said he liked to walk along Novyy Arbat, reciting. It helped him to memorize his lines and get into character. He told stories about acting out on the street, involving strangers, to gage by their reaction if his performance was on par by what Sim expected. He was devoted to his craft. Irka admired that. Pavlik said it only took him thirty minutes, from Novyy Arbat to Nikitsky boulevard to Tverskoy, and, voila. On premiere days, though, Kostik picked him up so they could spend time alone, to cultivate creative energy, as he called it.

Ilinichna put the received down and began to sob, lamenting. She rocked back and forth, back and forth.

Irka sensed it being fake, for show, and it irritated her. She came across plenty of *babushkas*, her own grandmothers including, who employed distress or fake heart attacks to get attention. Irka knew why. They didn't get any otherwise, but at the moment that was not her problem. Her problem was to determine that Pavlik was okay.

She hated writing to communicate with people, resorting to it only in dire circumstances. Her diary alone deserved to be written in. Writing meant hard labor, but this was an emergency.

She grabbed a pen and scribbled right on the attendance journal, where Faina checked the time actors came and went.

Who called? She wrote.

Ilinichna shook her head, rocking.

Irka grunted, shoving the journal in Ilinichna's face.

The old woman rolled up her eyes. This was getting worse by the minute. Sure enough, next she grasped her heart and made choking noises. Irka looked around, snatched Ilinichna's bag and upended it on the desk.

Choking escalated.

Hands shaking, Irka rummaged around. Loose change, loose candy, a wallet, spare glasses, rolled up panty hose, keys, a pepper spray, a newspaper. There. A vial of pills, another one. Irka offered both to Ilinichna, who suddenly opened her eyes, clear like nothing happened, snatched one, opened it, popped a

tablet in her mouth, swallowed and exhaled, color returning to her face. "*Oy, batyushki, umirayu ya.* Oh God, I'm dying. Oh my heart, my heart." She licked her lips. "Water, get me some water."

Irka stomped impatiently, like she wasn't going to buy into Ilinichna's bullshit, and pointed to her question.

"*Da chto zh ty takaya neterpelivaya!* What is this? So impatient. What if I had a heart attack? What if—"

Irka jumped with both feet, looking positively fierce. She'd scream, if she could, but her stare was good enough.

Ilinichna hiccupped. "Love him so much, do you? No good is he for you, I tell you. No good. You mark my words." She shook her head. "If you must know, Livchev called, Kostik's father." She wheezed, waving a kerchief at her face. "Said he left hours ago, for Pavlik, just before the firing started. Young fools. Thinks they might've stayed to watch—"

That was enough for Irka. Witnessing a power struggle that involved people shooting each other sounded like something Kostik would very much like to participate in, to brag about later. He probably convinced Pavlik to do it, and Pavlik probably obliged, to please his friend, as he did often. Irka observed it only too many times.

She darted for the door.

"*Stoy! Kuda!* Stop! Where are you going, pregnant? You're out of your mind! The baby! Think about the baby!" Trailed behind her, but the girl already made it under the arch and out on the street, hurling toward Nikitsky boulevard. She had a vague idea about the whereabouts of the White House, but her gut demanded she be there, on a wild chance of bumping into her friends, which was close to zero, what, in the city with population of over ten million, not mentioning the chaos that must have reigned on the site of political unrest.

None of this fazed Irka one bit. Not a single person in her life, not even her mother, showed her as much affection as Pavlik did in the last several weeks. Yes, he hasn't kissed her yet, but that only spoke of his chivalry. He barely dared to hold her hand, always careful, always tender. Accustomed to being handled like a piece of meat, for this alone Irka loved him with crazy abandon. She'd die for him, if she had to. Her own life didn't mean much, she wanted to give it away to Pavlik. But every time she thought about it, it seemed like even that was not enough. To express the magnitude of her emotions, she had to do something absolutely spectacular. She knew what. She had to give her life, to save his.

There, that sounded grand enough.

Irka sighed, pounding away.

This was her perfect chance.

Chapter 15. The Wounded

It didn't take Irka long to notice that something was wrong. For one, there were hardly any people in the streets and fewer cars. For another, by the time she made it to Novyy Arbat, she thought she clearly heard a loud boom, as did everyone around her. A tank must have blasted another shell. A car alarm went off in the distance. People poured toward Moscow river, to the bridge overlooking the White House, most out of pure curiosity without any idea of what was going on, wondering aloud. Smoke marred the sky. There were shouts and short bursts of gunfire.

Stubborn and determined, head low, Irka kept running, ignoring the tugging in her stomach. To prevent her breasts from jiggling, she circled arms around herself, picking up speed. Less than twenty minutes later she made it to the huge intersection that formed Freedom square where the White House stood, its upper windows issuing billows of smoke. The air smelled of smoldering resin and gunpowder. The road was blocked by trucks and buses, some of them overturned, some burning. Tanks and BTR-80's, guns poised at the building, circled the barricade. Soldiers sat on top, shouting. Some civilians climbed atop the trucks or helped others. Guns fired from the building,

one man fell. Promptly a string of Kalashnikov's bullets answered from behind the barricade. It was hard to understand what was going on, with people's behavior ranging causing death, quite literally, by shooting other people, to people smoking around and gawking at the scene like they were watching a movie, to hoodlums trying to break through the barricade to steal weapons from dead bodies.

Irka entered pure chaos.

More gunshots thundered right from behind her. She ducked, spotting gunmen hiding behind the subway entrance parapet, tips of their Kalashnikovs sticking out. This time the shooting didn't stop. The crowd of gawkers burst apart, sprinting out of the line of fire. Next to Irka, a man with a big camera suddenly fell.

"Sniper! Sniper on the roof!" A voice shouted.

Irka dropped to the ground, rolling behind a flowerbed.

"*Begom, begom, syuda!* Run! Run! Over here!" Huddled in a store entrance, a group of men shouted at a few teenagers with backpacks. The kids hesitated. A few of them crossed the square, dashing like mad. Others, too afraid to step into the open, hid behind an overturned trolleybus.

There was a short break in the gunfire. Irka found herself standing alone in the middle of the street. Terrified out of her mind, she darted after the teens, to the group of armed men.

"*Bystree, bystree!* Faster, faster!" They shouted at her.

She made it into their midst. They ushered her aside, aiming, and firing.

"*Dura!* Whatcha doing out here? You think it's circus for ya?" A soldier shouted in her face.

Irka covered her ears, thinking she'd gone deaf. She slunk to the ground half-crouching, half-lying. Feet stomped by her. She shut her eyes, crouching into the corner. All of a sudden she realized that what she did was so stupid, so completely and unforgivingly stupid. She wanted to fall through the ground from shame. What was she thinking? That she'd just stroll out into the square and find Pavlik standing in the middle of it all, would take him by the hand, miraculously avoid the bullets, and lead him to a safe place? What safe place? There was no safe place. Hasn't she learned her lesson by now? Even if they avoided being shot by a stray bullet coming from the men with Kalashnikovs, they could be shot down by a sniper, her, Pavlik, and Kostik. Because she wouldn't leave Kostik behind, would she? What was she, some kind of a savior? And what on earth gave her the idea that Pavlik and Kostik would be here in the first place? What were they, idiots? Certainly not. The idiot here was Irka.

She cradled her head, thinking, *I need to get of out of here.*

Irka opened her eyes. The militants left her alone. She stood, bushed herself off, and peeked out.

People were running. There were shouts, screams, gunfire, and more smoke, black acrid smoke. A line of OMON guys, Moscow city police department, decked in uniforms, helmets, and tall shields, attempted to disperse the crowd. A group of men carrying an injured soldier passed by. An ambulance whined its siren in the distance.

Irka had two choices, either to mingle in with those who fled, or keep hiding. Neither promised her safety. She chose to move. Movement meant life. She survived until now because she kept moving.

Irka rushed out, running to the right from the way she came, dodging people, keeping her head low, until she made it to the next intersection. She staggered, doubling down. An angry stitch tore at the side of her stomach, bloated and burning. She had to pee, now, or she'd have to do it in her pants.

Shooting commenced. It sounded like thunder blasting from all sides at once. Irka sprinted into a side street, keeping close to trees, running ahead blindly, hoping to find a dense enough spot where she squat and do her business. She covered her head, letting herself being carried away by her legs. There was an oldish looking brick apartment building with a low wall

surrounding a couple trash containers. There, she could do it there. Irka shot across the road.

A single shot echoed from above, followed by another. Somebody screamed. Irka halted, turning around. She couldn't tell why. The scream escalated. She could hear words now, "Help! We got shot! Help, help!" Instead of running toward the sound, a couple who ran behind her shrieked, "Sniper!" and disappeared behind a fence.

Irka pressed herself into the wall, breathing hard. The burning in her bladder was barely bearable. The voice yelled again, weaker. "Help! Somebody! Please..."

Irka's blood stilled. She recognized the voice. Feet moving on their own accord, she half-scurried, half-lurched, holding on to the wall, following the sound, until she came around the house to a parking lot filled with cars and prefab metal garages. Smack in the middle of it, parked at an angle as if in a hurry, stood the sedan she rode not too long ago. Next to it lay Kostik, immobile, a camera in his hand, his blonde hair splayed in a fan. Pavlik crouched over him, shaking, a hand on his leg. Blood oozed through his fingers. He looked up, said "Irina?" and passed out, falling over Kostik.

If Irka could scream, she would. She crawled close to the ground, slowly, reached for Pavlik and felt his hand. It was warm, he was breathing, he only lost consciousness. She reached

for Kostik. He was out cold. She couldn't tell if he was breathing or not. She raised her head, squinting through thin trees. Somebody sprinted toward them, a civilian, by the look of it. She could only stare, waiting for him to come near. Another burst of fire broke through the air, and the man dashed aside, falling on the ground and covering his head. He lay like this for several minutes.

Wind ruffled leaves. It smelled like it was about to rain.

Irka looked down at Pavlik, at his peaceful face, and slowly detached her mind from her body. She was an expert at this, having trained herself to ignore the body's pain and to concentrate on the mind, to endure the tortures of Marinova household. Whatever concerned her own wellbeing seized to exist. She couldn't leave Pavlik's to go pee in the bushes, period. Her mind switched to cold calculated order of tasks at hand. First, she had to dispose of the urine. Without a second thought, Irka wet her pants. There, now she felt better. She leaned over Pavlik, hoisting him up. It only looked easy, but in reality took her several minutes of concentrated effort to pull his limp shape on her back and stand, her legs shaking.

"*Kuda! S uma soshla?* Where are you going? Are you crazy? You can't carry him like this. Stop!" The man who was lying in the street ran to her. A woman joined him seemingly out of nowhere, yelling at Irka to let go. She claimed that she was a

doctor, demanding she take a look, and that the ambulance was on its way, somebody saw the boys shot and called it.

The woman crouched over Kostik, muttering.

Irka felt Pavlik being pulled down her back. She pressed her teeth together and employed the death grip. It meant she'd have to be killed, to be separated from her love.

"*Da otpusti ego, dura!* Let go of him, *dura!* You'll break his arm." The man shouted in her face.

She shut her eyes, gripping harder.

"Let go, you hear? Deaf, are you?"

"She's in shock!" Supplied the woman. "*Ey, devushka?* Hey, miss? Can you talk?"

Irka shook her head.

"See? What did I tell you." She looked up. "About time. Badly wounded, this one. Bullet lodged in the lung."

A screeching ambulance rounded the corner. A few minutes later an old Soviet van, white in its glory days but now cracked with rust, screeched to halt. Doors burst open, a round woman crawled out, followed by the driver in a crinkled coat and a cigarette stuck to his lower lip.

While they loaded the boys, every attempt to pry Irka's fingers from Pavlik's wrist resulted in her stubbornly tightening it harder. She paid no heed to the fact that she was

being yelled at, that her pants turned cold and clammy, sticking to her legs, that she stunk. Her goal was to stay with Pavlik.

"*Nu chto s ney sdelaesh, ah?* What will you do with her, huh?" The ambulance driver threw his hands in the air. "Holding on for dear life. All right, get in then." He spat and hopped behind the wheel. The nurse crawled in the back by the cots, Irka scooted behind her, never letting go.

Nurse shut the door, yelled to the driver.

The engine coughed, rumbled, and they took off.

Chapter 16. Pavlik's Recovery

Next five days Irka spent by Pavlik's bedside in an overcrowded hospital, earning a nickname *posidelka*, or sitter, from the clinic personnel, who took pity on her and let her stay. At night she slept curled up on a pile of old towels in a tiny broom closet by the cafeteria. The day they arrived, while surgeons extracted the bullet from Pavlik's leg, she washed her pants in a sink with plenty of soap, twisted them out and pulled them on wet. She regretted not grabbing her backpack before leaving the theater. It had a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a comb. But it didn't matter much. The important thing was, Pavlik was alive and she was next to him.

He recovered without complications. His upper thigh got pierced very close to the bone. Not a bad wound, but he'd have to wait for weeks before attempting waking, the doctor said. It devastated him. He wouldn't be able to climb stage props or perform his spectacular jump anymore, not for months, maybe. Pumped with drugs, in and out of heavy sleep, he was happy to find Irka at his side one morning, half-guessing the story on how she got there. He kept asking about Kostik, but she only shrugged. The clinic personnel didn't know of his whereabouts

either. Pavlik descended into gloom, barely talking, which greatly puzzled Irka. She certainly didn't have any girlfriends whom she was as attached as Pavlik was to Kostik. But then again, she didn't have any real girlfriends at all, only girls at school who'd tell her secrets banking on her muteness for keeping them, so what did she know about friendship or attachment?

On the sixth day Pavlik's parents showed up.

In the confusion that followed the firing of the White House, it took people days to find their loved ones, either wounded and in the hospital, if they were lucky, or dead in the morgue, if they weren't so lucky. Irka inadvertently heard from listening in on conversations that more than one hundred people died that day, some later in the hospitals. Kostik was separated from Pavlik to go into a different operating room, and she lost track of him. After that, afraid to leave Pavlik's side, she didn't dare to go and explore the clinic in the hope of finding his friend, but slipped a torn piece of paper with his name written on it, Konstantin Livchev, under everybody's nose in the ward, be it a nurse, a doctor, a patient, or a visitor. All of them only shook their heads. At night, while shut away in the closet, Irka gave herself bruises for not talking. If only she could speak, she'd find Kostik faster. People had no patience to read her badly written notes, running about crazed with sleep

deprivation, fueled by coffee and cigarettes, or, in extreme grief cases, by vodka.

Irka witnessed something amazing. Grief united people. It seemed to have erased their usual brashness, replacing it with quiet care. People helped each other, people brought each other food, people called relatives to try and help other people find their family members.

Deep in thought, she startled. There was a knock on the door. As opposed to the ward Irka was put in for abortion, this one had hospital rooms that spelled luxury by Russian standards of the time, each housing only two beds. Presently, one was occupied by a snoring old man, another one by Pavlik.

The door creaked open.

"Mama! Papa!" Pavlik said, sitting up.

A couple stepped in, two typical Moscow intelligentsia scholars, both in thick glasses. *Jews*, thought Irka. She failed to notice it about Pavlik, he didn't look like a typical Jewish boy. Her mother hated Jews, claiming that they robbed the country. Irka thought it was complete bullshit. She loved Jews, for their smarts and dark curly hair. Pavlik had it. If she could, she'd run her fingers through it a thousand times a day.

Both man and woman looked skinny and bent from working at the desk for too long, dressed neatly and clean. The woman took

in a breath. Slowly, with dignity, she walked over to her son. The man followed.

Irka jumped from the bed and stood aside. The man passed eyes over her, barely acknowledging her presence. The woman didn't look up at all. She sat next to Pavlik and took his hand.

"Mama, *mamochka*." He said, kissing her.

"*Synochka*. Sonny." She said in a controlled voice. "There you are." A shy tear rolled down her cheek, she swatted at it, embarrassed.

"Our *Pavlusha*, our beloved *Pavlusha*." Started the man, reaching to touch his son's forehead. "We couldn't find you, son. We looked everywhere, everywhere. We even thought maybe you—"

"Anton." The woman's glare cut him off.

"Forgive me, *Yulechka*." He pressed lips together.

Yulechka searched her son's eyes.

"Mama, don't worry, please, I'm fine. It's just a shot in the leg, nothing life threatening, I promise. I feel better already." Said Pavlik, beaming in a practiced stage smile.

His mother looked at him with admiration, stroking his face, holding it up by the chin. "I'm so happy we found you." She whispered. "We called every hospital in the city. They misspelled your last name. Couldn't find your records. How long

have you been awake? Why didn't you call us right away, *synochka*?"

Pavlik looked out the window.

"What were you doing there, I'd like to know." Tried Anton.

"Hush." Yulechka snapped. "Can't you see he's distressed? He'll tell us when he's ready, won't you, *synochka*?"

"We were practicing with Kostik—" Began Pavlik.

"Kostik again." Anton's face clouded. "That brainless egoist, the very child of corruption. And where is the scoundrel now, I'd like to know? Lounging at his father's newly built villa, unscathed, sipping champagne?"

Old man on the other bed stopped snoring, issued a loud grunt and turned to his side, causing a momentary pause.

"Papa, please don't talk like this about my friend. He got shot." Said Pavlik. "Worse than me. I don't know where he is. If I may, I would like to ask you to help me locate him. Irina and I..." He faltered, looking over at Irka, who stood immobile, afraid to breathe. These people positively frightened her with their attitude, manner of speech, and a certain sophistication she hasn't been privy to before. This was different from actor talk, this sounded more like professor talk discussing science issues on television.

"Mama, papa, *izvinite*. Please excuse me, I have neglected to introduce to you my dear friend. This is Irina Marinova, we

work together. If not for her, your son would be in a morgue right now instead of the hospital."

"Sonny." Said Yulechka steadily, her nostrils flaring. "Please, I ask you again, never say things like that. We've talked about this. Many many times, as I recall. You remember what I taught you, *da*? Words have power. You may call bad luck upon yourself by mentioning such dreadful things aloud. Better avoid saying them altogether. You agree with me, *synochka, da*?" She smoothed her skirt and smiled, waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry, mama. Yes, of course I agree. I didn't mean to call upon bad luck." Explained Pavlik patiently. "I only wanted to point out the fact that I wouldn't be alive if not for Irina who found me and Kostik, bleeding in the street, called an ambulance and stayed with us until we got picked up. I owe her forever for that."

He looked at Irka with misty eyes.

She considered shaking her head "no", it wasn't her who called the ambulance, but under the burning stares of Yulia and Anton Boim she couldn't move a muscle.

"Ah. And this brave lady would be...?" Said Yulia, stretching her lips politely, as if she hasn't heard her son before.

"Irina Marinova." Repeated Pavlik with a sigh. "She saved my life, mama."

"Did she?" Yulia passed her eyes up and down Irka.

Irka looked down, painfully aware of hair uncombed for days, crumpled dirty clothes with a slept in look, and holes in her socks. Nobody was allowed to wear street shoes in the hospital. You either had to wear slippers, or hospital gauze covers over shoes. Irka had neither.

"How extraordinary for a young woman to possess such spirit. Anton Borisovich Boim, forever indebted." Anton shook Irka's unresisting hand, bowing. She nodded. Evidently, that was enough for the man. "Yulechka." He prompted his wife, who looked at Pavlik.

"I don't remember you ever mentioning any Irina to me. How long have you been working together?" She said sweetly and trotted over to Irka, barely touching the tips of her fingers.

"Yulia Ibragimovna, pleased to meet you. I'm certainly touched by your interest in my son's life. Please accept my gratitude. I would like to note that I prefer to be called by my full name at all times, *da*?" She inclined her head, waiting, then turned to Pavlik with a question on her face. "What is this? Is she mocking me?"

"Oh, my apologies." Said Pavlik, flustered. "I have completely forgotten to tell you. Irina doesn't talk."

"Doesn't talk." Repeated Yulia, eyebrows crawling up her face. "Of all girls in the theater, you pick the one that doesn't talk?" Her face contorted.

"Mama, it's not like that." Pavlik sighed. "It doesn't matter, really, we communicate very well without words."

The sleeping man turned again. The bed squeaked under him.

Irka wished to fall through the floor. She also decided to give herself a particularly nasty collection of bruises this night for not being able to impress Pavlik's parents with fluent sophisticated talk appropriate for their sophisticated ears and for assaulting them with her unkempt appearance.

"Without words as in...?" Yulia said, horrified.

"Yulechka, I'm sure Pavlusha means nothing by it." Said Anton.

"Papa is absolutely correct. Mama, nothing happened between us, I promise. We are just friends."

"Just friends, I see. That's how it starts. Just friends, da." Said Yulia, smiling sweetly. "And this Irina acts at what plays exactly, if I may ask? I don't recall seeing her in any of your productions."

Anton only shook his head.

"She's an assistant... she does my makeup." Said Pavlik, then added hastily, seeing the look on his mother's face. "But Sim Novy himself has auditioned her. He says she has talent. He's thinking about finding her a non-speaking part in one of the upcoming plays."

"Oh." Said Yulia, appaled. "A makeup girl. Just the type. Anton," she looked at her husband, who lost a shade of color in his face, "why don't you talk to your son like a man to a man. Sounds like he needs a refresher on the topic of bodily relationships and possible outcomes that result in case of promiscuous behavior. Will you do me a favor?" She stood.

"Mama, we're both here." Said Pavlik, a trifle irritated.

"I can see that." She answered with a smile.

"Of course, Yulechka, of course." Said Anton.

"Mama, really, there is no need." Pavlik protested.

They had a curious tension between the three of them, Irka noticed. Their bodies and faces said one story, their tongues another. They were split in two, hiding their true thoughts behind carefully orchestrated phrases, all very polite, without a single profanity or a bad word.

Pavlik was afraid to disappoint his parents, and clearly missed them, by the sound of it being an only child, a very loved and cherished one at that.

His mother was happy to see him alive yet very upset at the idea of her son banging a girl without her knowing.

His father was pissed off at Pavlik's friend for dragging him into a political crisis that landed his son in a hospital yet afraid to upset his wife.

On the surface none of them said what they thought.

Irka couldn't believe this conversation. If her mother found out she was seeing a boy, worse, a Jewish boy, she'd beat her bloody, then tell Lyosha, who'd beat her bloodier still, then rape her for punishment, to force all desire to be with boys out of her body for good. People like Pavlik's parents didn't really exist in this world, did they? People who actually decided their disagreements with words? Irka tensed. Now more than ever she wished her tongue would cooperate, but it refused, of course, as it did her entire life. She couldn't even remember what it was like saying her first word *dura*. Oh, how badly she wanted to speak!

Distressed, she slapped herself.

Both Yulia and Anton glanced up, appaled.

The noise woke up the grumbling man, who sat up and spat. "Visitors, visitors, always visitors. No peace for me." He sucked in a snort and scratched his ass. "Doctor said I need peace and quiet, to sleep, get it?" He slid off the bed, to blank faces of Yulia and Anton who both looked through the man like he didn't exist.

The man shook Anton's shoulder. "I said, quiet! Hear?"

"Take your hand off me, young man." Said Anton stiffly.

The man cackled in laughter, bending over. "Young man!" Spit flew from his lips. "Young man! I was young man when your beard was peach fuzz. Young man. I'll go tell my doctor, you

wait. He'll come and kick your Jewish asses out of my room. Fucking Jews... Jews everywhere, flooded the country, stinky dirty thieves is what you are..." He shuffled out, muttering, and slammed the door behind him. One more door slammed, this one to the restroom, and stream of urine gurgled clearly, passing through cardboard walls easily.

Anton looked at his wife, in that knowing "I've heard this a million times" pained expression.

"Well." Said Yulia, controlling her voice. "I think we'd like to talk to the doctor, *da?*"

Irka was left behind as Pavlik, hobbling on crutches and supported by his mother and father left, to seek audience with the surgeon and ask when their son can be discharged.

Chapter 17. The Unexpected Encounter

Hours passed. Sky grew dark behind the window. The cooking *tetka* came and went, leaving two plates of lunch, then two plates of dinner. The old man held one-sided conversations with the girl, going on about Jews thieving from the country, about foreigners invading it and how Stalin would've fixed it all in no time. Irka listened, astounded at the amount of hate. She didn't care if people's skin was blue, as long as they didn't beat her. At last the crook fell asleep. She sat on Pavlik's bed, waiting, afraid to miss him. It was only after eight that a nurse showed up and asked her what she was doing here, since the young man has already departed. She winked, but Irka felt like dropping dead.

They left? They left without telling me? She scrambled out, ran to the closet, pulled on shoes and searched the halls for Pavlik's doctor. He has gone already. Desperate, she tried soliciting information out of the night nurses, but they only waived her off, busy. At last, she resorted to one and only thing left to do. She decided to go back to the theater and not leave until Ilinichna gave her Pavlik's address.

Irka hid in the closet, waited until it was dead in the night, crept out, slunk into the cafeteria, stole a loaf of bread, stuffed it in her jacket and descended into uneasy sleep, giving herself a hefty helping of bruises first.

At the break of dawn she ate the whole loaf, cramming it in her mouth, and, still chewing, marched out of the hospital, under Moscow sky pregnant with rain, fallen leaves whispering along the road. Irka had no money for the bus so it took her a good hour to walk to metro. Here she expertly pressed both hands against barrier slots of the faregate to skip through without paying and mingled with the crowd before the attendant lady from the booth ran out, yelling.

Irka waited for the train to arrive, when the hairs on her back prickled. She often felt people's intentions without them telling her what they planned. This was a bad one. Without turning, she sensed a heavy stare and a big bulky shape of a man. People surrounded her from all sides, yet she still felt uneasy.

The train arrived, empty, as this was its first stop. Before the doors fully opened, passengers rushed in, elbowing their way through to sit down first. Irka missed her chance and stood, swaying above the seated lucky. The doors smashed shut. The same burly shape pressed on her from behind, now with added alcohol breath.

The train lurched. A meaty palm landed on Irka's buttock, squeezing it. She froze on inertia and didn't dare moving for the next several stops, enduring. But slowly, gradually, anger flooded her, anger at someone always intruding on her private space, always using her to their advantage without asking for permission, like she was a thing. Pavlik would've never done something like that. Besides, she was no longer alone, she was with baby. By her calculations, she must've been about three months pregnant. With nausea absent and belly barely there, she hardly noticed, if not for peeing and eating more often than usual. And now her baby fluttered. She was positive she felt something, and she thought it was fear. She promised it to be a fierce mama. How was it being fierce, standing motionless, letting some swine massage her ass for his pleasure?

Irka took one breath, then another, then turned around. At first she could only stare, unblinking, then something like a gasp escaped her mouth.

The opposite party had the same reaction, staring at her, eyes glazed. Then he started to laugh like mad. He was no other but Lyosha Ivanenko, in flesh and blood. He seized Irka's wrist and yanked her up to his face. The train stopped, a dull voice announced the station, and he dragged her out together with the tide of passengers hurrying on their way to work.

"Surprise!" He said, swaying. It didn't matter what time of day it was, Lyosha was always drunk. Time of day only changed the degree of his drunkenness. "Irkadura, hahaha!" He laughed loudly, startling people around them. Irka didn't resist, knowing it was futile. She waited for an opportune moment, watching Lyosha's movements like a hawk. "There you are. I've been looking for you, don't you know. You dirty bitch." He aimed to slap her but missed. Anticipating it, Irka ducked, covering her face. Suddenly Lyosha's grip loosened. He let go of her hand and snatched another one, peering at the fingers.

Irka didn't understand at first what caught his attention.

He bellowed rage. "*Ah ty suka proklyataya!* You fucking cunt! Fucking thieving cunt!"

A few passersby threw irritated glances at them, but largely ignored the scene, hurrying on.

"Marinka's wedding ring! You stole it!" Continued Lyosha, his eyes bulging. "There she was, sorry bitch, blaming it on me! You'll pay for this, oh yes, you will, plenty." He pulled her behind him. Irka knew that if she didn't twist out of his hold now, she wouldn't be able to later, falling under his violent spell and sliding into her usual detached state. The baby, the baby inside her. She had to protect it. If Lyosha found out, he'd beat her to the point of miscarriage, because he'd never believe it was his. Staring at Pavlik for hours in the hospital,

she convinced herself it didn't matter who the biological father was, it mattered who raised it. If Pavlik truly loved her, if he on some wild chance married her, they'd raise it together like his own. The baby became an anchor Irka held on to in the midst of insanity that was her life. Suddenly, future had meaning, and she was determined to defend it at any cost.

They crossed the platform and were standing on the other side, waiting for the train to approach. Irka feigned submission, watching gleeful Lyosha out of the corner of her eye. She had a plan. It was a scary plan, but the only one that would work. If she succeeded, both her and baby would be free. If she didn't, both her and baby would be dead and in a way also free. *It really is a win-win*, thought Irka, peering into the tunnel.

Two lights broke through the gloom accompanied by the characteristic metro staccato. They stood by the very beginning of the platform. Perfect spot, as the train entered the station at considerable speed, slowing down closer to the middle.

Irka stiffened, ready. She saw the face of the train driver getting closer, closer. *Now!* In the next few seconds, she grabbed the arm of a young man standing to her left, yanked her hand out of Lyosha's hold, and jerked forward, flailing one leg over the platform's edge as if ready to jump.

Scared driver honked and slammed on the breaks. Tires screeched. A woman shrieked. From shock and surprise, Lyosha let go. The young man Irka held on to staggered back, cursing and pulling her with him. The train entered the station full speed, and Irka, her heart hammering, wedged through the crowd to freedom.

But Lyosha wasn't to be discarded easily. He hollered and vaulted after her, rudely pushing people apart.

Irka squeezed ahead, going against the tide of bodies, knowing that she had to make as much distance between her and her tormentor, to escape him. She could feel his breath not too far, it reached her in between strings of curses and profanities. Somebody shouted behind her, and she thought she heard a militia man's whistle. She paid it no attention, concentrating on getting away.

A hand swiped at her jacket but missed.

Involuntarily, Irka turned.

Lyosha's unshaven face leered at her, split in a sick grin. "Blyad'! Whore! You like to play? We will play." He reached.

Irka sprinted along the platform, dodging and weaving, aiming for gaps between people. She had no idea where she ran, her mind working fast. Lyosha was strong, yes, but he was heavy and slow. She'd have an advantage over him in speed. Irka accelerated, making it to the escalator, at the bottom of which

commuters congested into a squirming mass. She wedged inside, oblivious to stern comments, kicks and shouts, crawling through until she made it on and began ascending, pushing her way through.

Lyosha cursed, not too far behind. A couple people yelled at him to shut up. Irka stomped on, feeling faint, her leg muscles burning. She forced herself to jog up then had to resort to walking. Fortunately, the escalator came to an end and spit her out. She half-stumbled half-dashed ahead, into the marble tunnel, past an war veteran playing an accordion and roaring some Soviet song, through the swarm of scurrying bodies, anywhere, only to get away from Lyosha, who complained about his runaway daughter aloud, demanding those ahead grab her and bring her back to him, so she'd know better to flee from her father. A few older voices expressed interest and shouted her name.

Irka rushed out of the tunnel and nearly slipped down polished steps, finding herself on a different platform. Here she doubled down, catching her breath. She couldn't run anymore. Angry knives pierced her right side, her stomach pulsed with fluid retention. A thin sheen of sweat covered her skin. She felt like throwing up. Another second, and it would be over.

Directly ahead of her a train was getting ready for departure. Last passengers squeezed in. "Ostorozhno, careful," said the mechanical voice, "doors closing." Then it would say,

next station is, and name its title. After this the doors would close, and the train would take off. Having ridden Moscow metro her entire life, Irka knew this recording and its timing by heart. She had seconds left.

Cackling in victory, Lyosha reached for her from behind and grabbed at the collar. Irka thrashed out of the jacket, leaving it in Lyosha's hands, and shot forward. She ran for her life, for her baby's life, like she had never run before.

"Next station is..." Announced the voice.

Irka saw people's faces, saw them gaping at her, waving for her to stop. She didn't hear anything except that mechanical voice.

"...Tverskaya." Said the voice. The doors began to close.

Like in slow motion, Irka saw them inching toward each other, feeling her legs detach from her body and doing their own thing. And just as there was barely enough space for her to pass, she crashed inside. A split second later, the doors banged shut.

Reality rushed at Irka. She heard and saw everything at once, turning around. The doors had windows in them. In front of one stood Lyosha, enraged, shaking her jacket. A piece of paper floated out of a pocket. He bent, picked it up, read it, and triumphantly pressed it to the window, snarling.

Konstantin Livchev. Read Irka.

She couldn't do anything except breathe like a scared rabbit and stare, her pulse going berserk. The train pitched, picked up speed, and took off, leaving the horror of Lyosha Ivanenko behind. Irka let out a breath and collapsed.

Chapter 18. The Chase

Irka came to quickly. An old *babushka* patted her on the shoulder, saying something soothing. Others shook heads in dismay, yet others ignored the scene completely, stony-faced. She knew she had to get out of the subway. Lyosha was dim, but not dim enough not to know how to use a phone book and find out that Konstantin Livchev was a famous young actor who worked at a famous theater, then find the address and make his way there. During his nightly consumption of Irka's body, he told her he'd turn Moscow upside down in case she decided to run and that he'd kill her if she talked, laughing at his own joke, knowing she wouldn't, couldn't. She'd have to beg Ilinichna for Pavlik's address, visit him, then find another place to stay, but where?

Irka trotted out on the street, shivering, gulping crisp air. It sprinkled lightly. She'd have to find a new jacket in order not to get soaked and fall sick. Her feet carried her down familiar path. She made it to the back of the theater in no time, pausing before entering. How could she convince Ilinichna to give her Pavlik's address, especially after that rush departure? With tears. Tears worked on the old woman like a

charm. She had to pretend to be in pain, and the magic would happen.

Irka took a deep breath and entered.

She came up to the booth. Her stomach cracked. In place of Ilinichna a young girl talked on the phone, her big red mouth moving energetically, spelling out each word with precision. She looked up at Irka with a blank question in her eyes, scanned her up and down and returned to her conversation, something concerning a pair of shoes she saw on that one actress and where she could get one like that and how much it would cost and more of the talk Irka typically didn't participate in, her life's problems being far from figuring out how to get herself decked out in the latest fashion.

She glanced about, momentarily lost, then thought the least she could do was get her backpack, which had her diary in it, so she skidded down the steps. The girl yelled, "Miss! Hey miss! The pass! You have to have a pass to enter! Miss?"

But Irka already disappeared into the labyrinth, familiar smell of dusty velvet overwhelming her to the point of tears. It felt like home, albeit a temporary home, but still, and now she had to leave it like every other place, like the flat she grew up in. No matter how much she tried to deny it, she missed her mother, missed her grandmothers, her aunt and Lenchka, she even missed the dogs, the cats, the rat and the hedgehog. Heart

heavy, Irka made it to the corridor without meeting anyone, it being lunchtime, and tried for the door. Of course, she had left the key to Pavlik's room in her jacket, and the jacket with Lyosha. She yanked at it desperately. It was locked.

Above her footsteps echoed, voices talked. Irka had an uneasy feeling about this. She tried other doors, just because. One gave and she stumbled into a room. A beautiful actress sat by the brightly illuminated mirror, applying makeup.

"Who are you?" She asked in a deep nasal stage voice, lipstick in her hand. "How dare you barging into my dressing room?"

Irka had no time to explain, she grabbed the first thing she saw, woman's *shuba* hanging on a hook, and dashed out.

"My coat! That's my coat! She took *shuba*!" The actress's loud cries boomed across the corridor.

Irka darted up the stairs.

"Thief! Thief in the theater! That girl took my *shuba*!" Trailed from below.

Irka passed one corridor, another, and finally made it to the staircase leading up and out. Running directly at her was a young pimpled kid she recognized as one of the prop assemblers. He'd smile at her when she mopped the stage but never did anything filthy. With him, just as Irka's luck would have it,

was Vladimir Konkin himself. As soon as he saw her, his face twisted.

"You!" He shouted, brandishing a forefinger. "What are you doing here, eh? Whose coat is this? Give it to me."

Irka ducked, passing between both men by pure chance, and sprinted up.

"She stole it! Get her!" Shouted Konkin.

"But, Vladimir Vladimirovich, it's Irina, the cleaner girl." The kid blinked, uncertain.

"I know, I'm not blind, you idiot. I said, get her! That's Terekhova's coat she took, she came in it this morning!"

Irka used their hesitation to her advantage. She scurried into the booth and yanked the attendance journal right out of the new girl's hands, remembering Ilinichna flipping to the back of it for phone numbers. Before the concierge could shriek or protest, Irka was out of the theater, pounding away.

She threw the coat on her shoulders, relishing the softness of the fur, and took off in the direction of the city center, mixing in with the crowd of tourists who headed to Red Square, taking pictures and ogling at Russian architecture, a few of the brave ones who dared to visit Moscow in the middle of the political upheaval. Talking in a foreign language Irka didn't recognize, having hardly learned any German in school, they paused, unfolding maps to consult them, and Irka, trying to look

as inconspicuous as possible, slowed down, mingling in with the flow of people, of which there was always plenty at any time of day or night.

After a while, tiredness and hunger took over. She needed to sit down and eat, but more than anything she needed to pee.

Irka turned into the next arch, pressed herself into a wall, and leafed through the attendance journal. Sure enough, in the back several pages were filled with neat Ilinichna's writing, actors' names, phone numbers, and addresses. Irka smiled. Finally, she got lucky. She scanned page after page, mouthing names, looking for Pavlik's. The notes weren't organized alphabetically, it looked as though Ilinichna used them for personal records. On the third page Irka found what she was looking for, Pavlik's address. He lived on the boulevard she stumbled into when escaping the firing of the White House. The parking lot she found him and Kostik must've been very close to it.

Now, pee and food. Irka determinedly marched into the inner court behind the arch, the backs of old Moscow buildings gaping at her. She squeezed between two huge trash containers, pulled her pants down, and relieved herself, shaking off the feeling of shame that rose in the pit of her stomach. She had to keep herself healthy, for her baby, and if it meant peeing in public, so be it, because public restrooms were hard to find in Moscow,

the only good and clean ones being those in the newly opened McDonalds, but Irka was far away from it now, besides, it always had lines longer than those into Mausoleum to stare at dead Lenin.

A guy shouted an obscenity at her from one of the windows. A babushka walking out a baby in a Russian style baby carriage, a huge barrel of a thing on wheels, shook her head. Irka didn't mind. She pulled up her pants and scurried out, racking her brain on how and where to get food, gazing at her mother's ring.

A typical Soviet wedding ring was a plain band made of rose gold. Everyone bought same rings and married the same way, pronounced husband and wife in a stony voice by same-looking fat *tetka* with a brick-face, a red sash across her rectangular shape, the ceremony taking place in a typical Soviet utilitarian building painted some disgusting mint color, or dirty pink, or, worse, orange. Irka hated orange. She shrugged, still studying the golden band on her finger.

Typical wedding bands varied only in thickness. The more money you had, the thicker one you could afford, breaking out of the communist box of everyone being the same. At least that's how Irka understood communism in her sixteen years of life, and it didn't make any sense to her. For one, women and men were different, women had boobs, men had dicks, how could that be the same? Marina Marinova's ring was engraved, custom-made and must

have cost a fortune. Irka knew next to nothing about her father. Her middle name, as the Russian custom was, got fashioned after his first, Gerasimovna, so his name must have been Gerasim Marinov. Traditionally, women changed their last names to their husband's. Apparently, he was either made of money or had a really good taste, or both, because her mother fondly remembered him taking her out to expensive restaurants. Their wedding was held in one, with lots of friends and food and music. Her wedding dress she sold a long time ago. In fact, she sold everything she got at that wedding, the silver cutlery set, the plates set, the crocheted bedding, the earrings Gerasim gifted her. Other things were stolen by her various boyfriends. The wedding ring was the last item she cherished, only to be stolen by her daughter.

One more thing Irka knew. From Marina's words, her father was raised in an orphanage, so there was no family on her father's side that she could go to, not that she would know where to go.

Drizzle stopped. Dusk rolled over the city. Packs of people hurried home before it turned dark. Cars honked, congesting the streets with break lights and squealing tires.

Irka leaned on a wall, feeling the ring. It had berries engraved into. Clusters of them hung from branches that curled along the circumference, uninterrupted. If you held it to light,

the berries glinted faintly. It really was beautiful, and it would probably sell for a lot of money.

How much is it worth? Thought Irka, frowning. *Who would buy it, a jeweler?* She looked around. She could try to pawn in on the street, but she'd run the risk of getting robbed. There were no jewelry stores around and might take her ages to find one. Clouds rolled in, the sky darkened by the minute. If she didn't make it to Pavlik now, she'd have to find a place to sleep, before night caught her unaware. She could always curl up on the top landing of his building.

That did it. Irka sighed, rubbed her empty stomach, and aimed for the subway.

Chapter 19. Pavlik's Flat

It didn't take Irka long to find Pavlik's apartment building. She got out of the subway and walked along the route that led to the White House, streets now mostly clean from the wreck of the assault. She stopped by the parking lot where Kostik and Pavlik were shot and consulted the journal. Yes, this was it. The building loomed at her in the darkness, sturdy and plain, a typical *mnogoetazhka* of the Soviet-era. She tried the entranceway's door. It gave. The code machine was broken, its front panel hanging loose off mangled wires, probably wrecked by marauders.

Irka entered. A foulds stench hit her nostrils. Right on the landing, in front of the elevator, lay a drunk, mumbling under his breath. He saw Irka and stretched out an arm. "*Dochka, dochenka!* Girly! Help me!"

Ikra leaned, offering him a hand. He slapped at it angrily. "Not this, I need money! Give me money!" An empty bottle of vodka rolled away from him. His crotch was stained with urine.

Irka edged around. He attempted to grab at her ankles. She sprinted up the stairs, deciding to forego the elevator altogether. She didn't know what floor Pavlik lived on anyway,

armed only with his flat number. It took her a while to make out the digits in near darkness. The floors were poorly lit.

At last she found what she was looking for. Pavlik's door, one of the four on the fifth floor, of nine floors total. Every door reflected the financial wealth of the occupant inside, ranging from those installed at the time of the building's construction, wooden shabby slabs, to fake-leather upholstered ones, for soundproofing, to hunks of metal designed to withstand an armed attack. Doors were the pride of homeowners in Russia, as were cars, fur coats, golden teeth or chains or rings, depending on the preference of the owner as to what body part to expose, and things inside the house, like Persian rugs, color TV's, and other hard to buy items.

Pavlik's door was steel, newly painted. It had a peephole, as did all of them, and the bell button. Delicious smell wafted from it. Irka inhaled, her stomach rumbled. It smelled like pelmeni. Oh, she loved pelmeni, homemade, with sour cream. She tiptoed closer, peering into the hole. It had an inverted lens. She could hardly see anything, apart from the light. She put her ear to it and listened. There were voices, soft voices, discussing something, and the clinking of cutlery. They were eating dinner. It's for this reason that some people padded their doors, so nobody could snoop on them, because anyone could enter the building, even if it was protected by the code. There

were ways to get in anywhere, if you knew how. Everyone spied on everyone, it went both ways. The old fear of Stalin was still alive in people's minds, those dreaded Black Ravens, Stalin's Secret Police cars that picked up people in the middle of the night and took them to their deaths.

Irka minced her feet. The *shuba* felt hot, so she slid it off, hesitating. What if they wouldn't open the door after seeing her through the lens? Or, what if they would but wouldn't let her see Pavlik? Or what if—

Her train of thought was interrupted.

Somebody called the elevator from below. It creaked to life, shaking and hitching, and descended to the first floor. It could be someone going to the fifth floor, and if they were, they were bound to make all kinds of racket or at least ask Irka what she was doing here, because every *pod'yezd* in every apartment building became a sort of a commune. For better or worse, neighbors banded together, living in such proximity to each other, asking for salt or sugar or milk when they ran out, babysitting each other's children, partying, gossiping, basically doing everything under the sun usually with little concern to those whom they disturbed, sometimes passing out right on the landing from consuming too much vodka, like the drunk Irka saw below, or, worse, being kicked out by wives to sober up, freezing and bothering neighbors, begging them to let

them in. People even went as far as administering medical care to each other, with ambulances almost never arriving on time or its personnel refusing to carry down people too big or too fat as happened to Lyosha once when he dropped in front of their door and Marina thought he had a heart attack. She called the ambulance in hysterics. It arrived an hour later. Medics flat out refused to take him down, saying the stretcher won't fit in the elevator, so she'd have to carry him down herself or else. Meanwhile, Lyosha stirred and woke up, to Irka's dismay. She hoped he bit the dust.

The elevator rattled upward.

Irka ran up one flight of stairs where the trash receptacle column yawned, issuing rank cold from its depth. Irka gagged, thinking about her grandmother throwing dead puppies into it. The elevator passed the fifth floor but stopped on the sixth. Afraid to be seen, Irka darted down, listening. Heavy footsteps echoed across the landing, keys jingled, a man coughed and shut the door behind him.

Irka let out a breath. She had to make up her mind. Who was to say some grimy *tetka* didn't spy on her for the last several minutes? Snooping was her neighbor's Praskovya Aleksandrovna's hobby. She watched who came and went and then announced it to other *babushkas* sitting outside on the bench, mulling over every neighbor's bones, discussing who slept with whom or bought what

or got sick with what disease. Whenever Praskovya stayed with Irka, she told her stories of germs that ate your limbs, turned them black and made them fall off, but that if she only called on her guardian angel, she'd be protected. Irka firmly believed that the old crow had lost her mind, because in school she was taught to wash her hands to get rid of the germs, not call on angels, who, as her teacher explained after she asked, didn't exist and stories like these polluted young soviet children's minds, so she better forget about it.

The elevator came to life again.

Irka took a deep breath and rung the bell, her pulse accelerating.

The voices hushed. Steps approached. An eye peered into the hole.

Irka swiftly threw the *shuba* on, to look more stately, and brushed bangs out of her face, smiling.

There was movement behind the door, then some murmuring. Irka stood still, hoping against hope they would let her see Pavlik. There was more whispering, then what sounded like arguing.

At last, locks turned and the door opened a crack. Yulia's eye studied Irka over a chain. "Irina, is it?"

Irka nodded, relieved.

"Mute girl who saved my son. What an unexpected visit. May I ask what you are doing here and who gave you our address?" She strained to keep her voice polite, hiding obvious irritation.

"Mama, who is it?" Pavlik's voice trailed from the corridor.

"Sosedka. Neighbor. Tatiana." Called Yulia. "Asking for butter." She turned to Irka. "What do you want?"

Irka took a step, reaching out.

Yulia shut the crack to a mere line. "Don't come closer. Answer my question. Why are you here? What do you want?"

Anton stood behind her, as Irka deduced by his voice. "Maybe it's an innocent visit, Yulechka. She probably came to check on her friend."

"How does she know where we live? Do you have an explanation for that?" Whispered Yulia fiercely. "How do we know who she is really, maybe she's a scam artist. Maybe she's not a Moscovite like she claims. What if she's after the residence permit, have you thought about that?"

This was clearly meant for Irka to hear, to warn her that whatever intentions she had, they were aware of them. At least Yulia was.

Irka realized with horror that her passport was in the backpack that still resided in Pavlik's dressing room in the theater and there was no way she could prove to his parents the

validity of her claim of being a native. Fake marriages were on the rise, with smaller town folk vying for Moscow's food and other life privileges through obtaining a permanent residence permit that allowed them to hold jobs and avoid being detained by militia and thrown out of the city.

"But Pavlusha said—" Rebuked Anton.

"Shhh!" Shushed him Yulia.

"Mama, papa, what is going on? Who is it?" Pavlik's voice sounded closer.

"Nothing, *synochka*, nothing." Said Yulia and shut the door.

Irka's heart cracked over the concrete floor. It was a lost cause. Anyone showing up at the door uninvited, until proven innocent, was deemed as a stranger who could cause harm, in light of recent Soviet Union's disbandment and the rise of the crime, from casual begging, to petty burglary, to elaborate financial schemes striping people of their homes, to ordered murders performed chiefly in the convenient darkness of *pod'yezds*, to extrasensory healing by self-proclaimed hypnotists such as Anatoly Kashpirovsky who charged water through TV screens, claiming it could heal cancer. Irka's grandmother Valya was a fan, sitting faithfully with *banka* upon *banka*, jar upon jar filled with water, ogling at the screen. Irka couldn't stand the idea. And now she herself was on the other side.

The chain rattled off, the door sprung open.

Behind it stood flustered Pavlik fully dressed and in slippers, leaning on crutches, his face haggard but alert. "Irina!" He exclaimed. "I'm so happy to see you. How did you find me?"

Irka brandished the journal.

"Ilinichna let you take it?" He gaped. "My address is in there?"

Irka shook her head, then nodded, then lowered her head, embarrassed.

"Oh, how rude of me. Please forgive me. What are we doing, standing in the doorway. Come in, come in. You can explain everything later. We were just finishing dinner. Are you hungry?"

Irka's stomach rambled. She nodded.

Pavlik fussed, leading her inside. "Sorry I didn't come back to say goodbye, we had to leave quickly. Papa had get my medication and he was already late for work." Pavlik locked the door and hobbled out of the way so Irka could take off the coat.

She clutched it to her chest, looking around.

The apartment spelled cleanliness and orderliness the likes of which she hasn't seen. You could eat off the parquet floor, it shone that bright. Where it didn't shine, it was covered by rugs. Walls were lined with bookcases, and more rugs. Rugs, lace curtains, crystal chandeliers. These people certainly had money.

"May I take your coat?" Offered Pavlik, and added in an undertone. "Looks oddly familiar." He winked.

Irka blushed, noticing an odd silence.

Anton stood to the side, Yulia next to him, her arms crossed, her face frozen in a mask of politeness.

"Irina. Perhaps you can explain to us the goal of your unexpected visit?" She said quietly. "Pavlik, I take it you have paper and pencil you can give to your friend? I'd like to know to what we do we owe the honor."

"Yulechka, they're friends. It's perfectly natural for friends to visit each other, especially when your friend is such a brave young lady." Interjected Anton, clearly pleased that a girl has visited his son. "Am I right, Pavlusha?"

"Natural. You call this natural, coming over at this hour without notifying us in advance?"

"But, Yulechka, she can't talk! Pavlusha said—"

"I remember what Pavlusha said, you don't need to remind me, thank you." Yulia swiveled her eyes at Irka, looking at the coat. "Did your parents buy you this for you?"

Irka held on to the fur, her fingers turning sweaty.

"You can't purchase it in a store, it would have to be custom made." Continued Yulia, a jealous glint in her eyes. Every Russian's woman dream was to own an extravagant *shuba*. Not Irka's. She simply grabbed what was available. "Would cost a

considerable sum of money, that. Your family must be well-to-do. May I ask where your parents work?" Yulia crossed her arms.

My mother is a high-school dropout with alcoholic tendencies, my father left me before I was born, and my current step-father used to rape me for pleasure, said Irka inside her head, surprised at her own pun.

"Mama, let us continue at the table, what do you say? Irina is hungry, and there is plenty of pelmeni left." Offered Pavlik nervously. "She will eat and then she can tell us all about her reason for a visit."

After a little bit of bickering masquerading for decision making, the Boim family led Irka into a room where a dining table was set with porcelain plates and silverware, a steaming pot in the middle.

Chapter 20. Irka's Stay

Irka stayed for dinner, then she stayed for a couple days, then she stayed for a couple months, first due to Pavlik's pleading with his mother, then assuming the role of the housekeeper. Despite her distaste of the girl, Pavlik's mother was impressed with Irka's cleaning skills, and even sent her grocery shopping, ordering her around like a slave when Pavlik or Anton weren't present. Irka didn't mind, this treatment didn't compare to how she grew up. She was happy sleeping on a mattress on the kitchen floor, rolling it up first thing in the morning and rolling it out at night.

Pavlik only got his way with Anton's support who learned that Irka ran away from home and said they would be good Samaritans to repay their debt for saving their son's life. Yulia reluctantly agreed, watching both Pavlik and Irka like a hawk to make sure no indecency passed between them. Not like she needed to. Pavlik only tenderly offered Irka his hand when she came up the stairs or stepped out of the elevator or kissed her on the cheek as a greeting, and that was as much physical contact as happened between them. He was being extraordinarily gallant in Irka's eyes. She couldn't hope for more, her only

desire was to pass a hand through his hair, but she was afraid to ask for it in fear of breaking the delicacy between them. They spent many hours on the balcony, talking. Well, rather, it was Pavlik talking about philosophy, life, and the future, and Irka nodding.

They carefully discussed her pregnancy when it was safe. Pavlik kept asking who the father was and what was she going to do with the baby, where would she live, would she go back home? Irka always left the question unanswered, staring at her feet, yearning with her whole body for him to hug her, to tell her he loved her and would marry her, just like happened in the movies, like it was supposed to happen. But Pavlik never did, falling silent and staring into distance, as if grieving over something. Irka noticed that the family carefully avoided the topic of Kostik. She didn't dare to ask what happened, in fear of causing pain to the love of her life, because that's who Pavlik became for her. She started a new diary in a journal he gave her. On one side she wrote answers to him when they talked, on another she wrote secret entries.

Dear diary, I found the love of my life. His name is Pavel Boim. I love him more than the sun, more than the sky, more than the stars. I want him to marry me. We will raise my baby like it was his own and have many more. They will have beautiful curls and Pavlik's eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world. I want

to live with Pavlik until the end of my life and I want to die with him on the same day.

Pavlik healed fast and was due to start visiting the theater soon. Sim Novy grew impatient, calling almost every day and threatening to come for a visit if his parents didn't let him participate in rehearsals, saying he will personally pick him up and drive him home every night.

Irka warmed up to Boim's house, feeling safe and secure. She rarely made it outside, mostly for grocery shopping, staying together with Pavlik as much as possible. She almost forgot about the uncertainty of her future and the predicament of her precarious position, only rarely remembering about Lyosha's threat to find her and kill her. Life was good, but, as always, life did things its own way. She was sturdily built, short, with an ample ass and boobs that only grew bigger due to pregnancy. Fall ended. Winter came, with its snow and freezing wind. And Irka's belly grew. She could hardly hide it underneath Yulia's hand-me-down sweater, and one night, after everyone lounged around, having just consumed a hearty dinner, she stood up too fast, too eager to clean the dishes. The edge of the sweater lifted. She stood too erect, realizing her mistake too late.

Yulia dropped her cup of coffee. Fine china broke, coffee stained the rug. Yulia threw a hand over her mouth, horrified.

"Yulehcka, what's the matter? Are you all right?" Anton hobbled over, hugging his wife.

"She's pregnant." Yulia whispered, pointing. "Irina is pregnant!" Mortified, she looked at her son, who sat still. Not a muscle twitched in his face, it's as if he anticipated this.

"Who is the father?" Said Yulia without preamble, glaring at Irka.

Irka slouched back into the chair, not knowing what to do with herself. This was the end of her stay, she was convinced of it. Any minute they would kick her out. Where would she go, in the middle of the winter?

"Now, now, let's not draw any rash conclusions." Said Anton soothingly. He warmed up to the girl considerably over her stay, particularly encouraging her to spend more time with his son. However, Boims still carefully concealed her from friends and relatives, kicking out Irka to take walks before guests showed up and not permitting her to come back unless a certain amount of time has passed. "Irina is a stately young lady." Anton fixed his glasses. "She's only sixteen, Yulechka, something like this is unheard of. She rounded out a bit, I must say, on our food. Irina, with your permission, if you don't mind, of course..." He came up to her, head inclined. "May I ask, are you, indeed, pregnant?"

Irka could do nothing but stare. She glanced from Pavlik to his mother to his father to Pavlik again.

Pavlik sat stock still, breathing hard, as if he was preparing to dive into ice-cold water.

Anton waited with a polite smile. Gradually, the corners of his lips drooped and his face lost color. "You are pregnant." He coughed nervously into a fist. "That is highly unfortunate. You see, I don't think we can provide you with the roof over your head anymore. Neighbors will talk. They're already talking, but this. This is absolutely unacceptable."

"It's not what concerns me at the moment. *Pavlusha*?" Said Yulia through teeth, eyes blazing.

Pavlik remained silent, focusing on the wall.

"Well, of course, there is the question of the father. I trust our son." Said Anton confidently. "I'm sure he had nothing to do with this. Our *Pavlusha* would never—"

Pavlik jumped up so fast, the chair toppled from underneath him. "I'm the father." He said, and looked at Irka, veins pulsing on his neck.

Irka hiccupped from surprise. She was the first to realize what this statement meant, and right there, in front of Pavlik's paralyzed parents, leapt to her feet and threw herself on Pavlik, unable to hold back. She hugged him hard, breathing into his chest, and at last dared to reach and feel his hair. It was

just as she expected, smooth and warm and silky. He slowly put his arms around her, hugging her for the first time.

That night, after enduring a long grilling session by both Yulia and Anton, and then an even longer lecture on everything starting from contraception, to venereal diseases, to unsafe sex, to teenage pregnancy, to raising children, to the cost of raising children and to complexity and unforgiveness of adult life in general, to their potentially thwarted future because of the baby, Irka and Pavlik spent their first night together in the same room, in the same bed, and it was nothing like Irka expected.

She got naked quickly, ready for him to take her, offering her body in the easiest position she knew, sprawled on the bed with legs wide apart, but Pavlik walked around her and covered her with a blanket. His hands froze midway. He stared at her breasts, at the bruises on them. "What are those?" Irka hung her head. "Who did this to you?" She pointed to herself. "Why? Why would you do that?" Irka shrugged, stuck out her tongue, and made sawing motions, then slapped herself. "No, don't do that!" Said Pavlik, covering her up. "You never told me why you're not talking. I want to know, when you're ready, I'm here for you, okay? I would love to help, if I can." He covered her with the blanket and turned away. Irka sat up, bewildered. The blanket

slipped off her breasts. She didn't care, she was his, why wouldn't he take her? Did the bruises make her look ugly?

Pavlik disappeared behind a partition, one of those old accordion style ones, changed to striped button-up pajamas and came over quietly, sitting down, then put his face into his hands and started to cry. Irka didn't know what to do, unaccustomed to such behavior. She scooted over closer and held him. After a while he leaned on her shoulder, his tears trailing down her neck and rolling down to her belly. It took a long time for him to calm down, not that he made a single sound while crying. He sat up, studying her naked shape, and passed a finger, ever so softly, over her skin.

"You have beautiful nipples. Velvety." He croaked finally.

Relieved, Irka shook her head, and boldly reached for what she thought was hers now.

Pavlik stiffened, then slowly relaxed, letting her hold it through the fabric. "You think my penis is beautiful?"

Irka nodded, massaging it. It remained limp.

"But you haven't even seen it."

She shrugged, like it didn't matter.

"It's average. Kostik has the most beautiful one in the world. Had." He hung his head and started crying again.

Irka stared, comprehension downing on her for the first time. How could she be so blind? *But, she thought, things like this don't exist in Russia...*

Pavlik looked up. He could always read her thoughts and answer them, as if they were really talking. "I'm gay. Kostik and I, we were... He died in the hospital. The bulled got too close to his heart and..." He trailed off, swallowing to suppress tears. "Mama and papa don't know. Please don't tell them, it will kill them. Please, promise me you won't."

Irka nodded, and so they sat. She held Pavlik's head in her lap until he fell asleep and she herself nodded off when cold winter morning light spilled into the room, coloring everything blue.

Chapter 21. The Pregnancy

Irka's heart was broken. The next several days she spent in a daze, walking on shattered glass. Pavlik would never be hers. All this kindness, all this admirable self-restraint was nothing more but a thin veneer of social appropriateness. Pavlik didn't love girls, Pavlik loved boys. The concept didn't fit in Irka's mind. She knew about gays, in the general sense of what one could surmise from growing up in Soviet Union reading condemning bits and pieces in newspapers or hearing it trashed on TV, real information provided only by peers, rarely. Still, it wasn't something she considered on a daily basis, it was absent from her world, and now that it was there, she began to see it everywhere.

She thought back to every interaction between Pavlik and Kostik, mechanically doing things, while Boims spent hours and hours on deliberations over how to fix the situation, how to announce the news, whether or not to let Irka stay or to arrange with her parents for a purchase of a separate flat, which they were sure they could afford, judging by Irka's coat. And, more than anything, they fussed over formalizing the union and throwing a wedding, which was tricky. Pavlik was of marrying age

at eighteen, but Irka, at sixteen, wasn't. That meant bribes, bribes meant money, money meant unplanned spending, something both Yulia and Anton hated.

Irka and Pavlik hardly had any time alone, both exhausted at night and promptly going to sleep, hugging each other, Irka in her grief over Pavlik, and Pavlik in his grief over Kostik, only to be woken early in the morning by Yulia, calling for breakfast and more discussions. Inadvertently, together with anxiety, news of the baby injected life into Boim household, like babies did in general in Russian families, being a sort of a social glue, guaranteed for the period of time while they were cute and before they started talking.

It was Irka's turn to ask questions. One morning, before dawn, she shook Pavlik awake, tapping on the journal.

Beloved Pavlik, why did you say you were the father of my child? I need to know, for our future baby. She spent many hours writing this, sweating over every letter looking perfect.

"What? What time is it?" Said Pavlik, rubbing his face.

Irka insisted. She had to know.

"Oh. This." He squinted at the journal, trying to make out words in the dim light, sat up and hugged his knees. "Right. Was wondering when you'd ask. I apologize for avoiding it. I should've explained. Should've anticipated you'd like to know.

Well, my answer is very simple. You saved my life. I wanted to return the favor."

Irka shook her head. She could tell he was lying, or, rather, not saying the whole truth. Ready for this, she carefully wrote the next line. *That's not the real reason.*

Pavlik sighed. "It's not. You're right. Can't hide anything from you, can I?"

Irka smiled and nodded. Although she couldn't talk, she could read people very well, especially those she loved.

"It's papa." Said Pavlik quietly, glancing at the door. "Papa, and mama too, of course. They don't know. I don't want them to know, not now, not ever. It was the perfect opportunity for me to prove their suspicions as pointless, to secure my position among my colleagues, you know, for the theater, for..." he licked his lips, "...for my future career." He threw a shy look at Irka, whose mouth dropped open. "Please, forgive me." He added. "Will you forgive me?"

He took her hands.

Irka sat motionless. She expected all kinds of things from this frail sympathetic young man, career ambition being the least likely of them. She was just a tool for his job?

She freed a hand and wrote slowly. *Why?*

"Why what?"

Why won't you tell them?

"Oh, it's..." He chuckled at her innocence, or ignorance, or both. "It's... it's not just a simple matter of stating it. We're not easily accepted for who we are." Stammered Pavlik. "Maybe one day I will attempt to tell you more, but... not right now, okay? Please, I beg of you, may we shelve this conversation for later?"

So, you never loved me? Wrote Irka.

"I did, I do. I do love you. Albeit not in the sense of, you know, how a man loves a woman. You're more like a friend to me, a very dear friend, like a... sister." He added, looking up into her eyes pleadingly.

Bitterness flushed Irka. Men were, after all, the same, gay or straight, didn't matter. She thought she found the one, she thought it was perfect, he was perfect, their future would be perfect. She was mistaken. It was part of growing up, wasn't it, but *chert*, devil, it hurt tearing off the wings she sprouted by dreaming. She needed to root it out of her system, this desire to dream. Once more, it didn't do any good. Once again, a man made a decision without asking her first, without considering her feelings. Irka began growing tired of it.

What if I don't want you to be the father of my baby? It was the hardest thing she ever wrote, and it was harder still to turn the journal toward Pavlik. How could he know her desire to

be with him, why did he simply assume that she'd fall for it like a butterfly for a light?

Pavlik blushed. "I... read your diary. You left it on the desk and I thought it was one of my journals. I opened it and... I'm so sorry."

Irka was used to her privacy violated, but somehow her diary stood above her body, above everything else. It was sacred. It was a place she confided in, and now it was violated too. By a man. As always.

She swiftly stood and began dressing.

"Irina, please. I didn't mean to, it was an accident. I... Kostik never wrote about me, it was... Please, don't go." Said Pavlik.

Irka didn't turn. *Maybe it was for the best they found out, she thought, maybe it's not my place to be here, maybe I should go home, back to where I belong, in a shithole.* As much as she despised her mother, Marina Marinova was real. Yes, she drunk, yes, she cursed and beat her, but they had good moments too, and those were honest. She was sick of Yulia's sweet pretense, of Anton's pompous smarts, and now of Pavlik's slyness. You couldn't trust anyone in this life, could you? No, thought Irka, *I can only trust myself, only believe in my own zadnica, ass. If I won't do shit, nobody would do shit, there isn't any help coming from anywhere any time soon, not some dude sitting in the*

sky, not some hypothetical guardian angels. Forget it. Irka wanted to curse really bad, aloud, slam it with a juicy word, it was the right moment for it, only her tongue wouldn't move.

Before Pavlik could stop her, she slid out of the room, donned her *shuba* and ran out of the apartment building, crunching on the fresh snow with Yulia's hand-me-down boots that were too small and hurt her toes. Irka didn't care, didn't mind, she simply wanted to get away, to breathe, to think, to decide what to do next.

It was still dark, with light breaking over the treetops. New snow fell during the night, and Irka made tracks in it, the first to disturb it. After a while, she began making patterns, stepping at an angle, like from tires of a gigantic truck. Then she tired of it and stopped, kneeling. She looked at the snow, at how peaceful it seemed, how smooth and white. Why couldn't her life be like this? Why did it always have to turn upside down just when she thought it went well? Why couldn't she get lucky?

The baby kicked. Irka thought, *wrong. I'm mistaken. It's not my life anymore. I'm not alone, I'm with baby. I must think about the baby. My baby needs home. My mom's apartment is no place for it. I need to swallow my hurt and get back.*

She reluctantly stood up and turned, just in time to see a pack of boys in dark jackets and beanies pulled low round

Pavlik's building, slapping each other and laughing like donkeys. It was too early for anyone to be out at this hour, not even for resilient dog owners. Her guts melted. They looked exactly like Roma and the gang who raped her. They were leaving. What did they do in Pavlik's *pod'yezd*?

Irka hid behind the tree, which didn't do much good, considering her belly, and waited for a few minutes, then quickly crossed the inner court and ran inside, stomping off the snow. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. She slowly made it up the stairs, peering around. What did they want here? Could it be a coincidence? Maybe they were similar looking guys, she didn't get a chance to see their faces, did she? Suddenly Lyosha's face swam up in front of her, and she darted up, running like a scared gazelle, afraid he would materialize out of thin air and snatch her ankles.

She heaved by the door, rattling keys, having a hard time inserting them. She couldn't be on her own, she got comfortable and lazy living with Pavlik, forgetting the dangers of the street. They were still there. She will marry him. What choice did she have otherwise? To raise the baby alone and end up an alcoholic like her mother?

Irka quietly opened the door and stepped in.

Chapter 22. The Visitor

Breakfast went by, then lunch. Irka smiled and did her best to appear happy, puzzling Pavlik to no end. He tried coming up to her, tried asking what was wrong, guilt written all over his face. Irka only smiled and flitted off, busying herself with housework, much to Anton's delight who pointed out to his wife what good care she would take care of her future husband. Yulia didn't fully buy it, suspicious as well as superstitious. Boims weren't religious Jews, they didn't practice like some of their other friends. They made their money by selling jewelry, a hard business to break into, spending their free time studying art and literature, or, rather, buying it as an investment.

"We need to go see a doctor, you and I." Yulia put a hand on Irka's shoulder while she washed the dishes. "To make sure the baby is healthy, yes? That you're healthy. You're a very young mother. There are advantages and disadvantages to that." She smiled pleasantly, peering at Irka through thick glasses.

Irka stopped, hands covered in suds. This didn't sound right. There was something Yulia didn't tell her, some hidden agenda for this. Was it possible to determine with tests who the

real father of the baby was? Irka was sure it was, only she didn't know how. Her chest filled with lead.

"How are you feeling today?" Asked Yulia.

Irka nodded, signifying that she was feeling well.

"*Horosho*. Good. I will need you to go for a walk again, after you're done here, yes? We have a very important guest coming in an hour. I don't want you to be around, for various reasons. Nothing personal. You understand, of course." Pavlik was gone with his dad to a doctor, so there was no support Irka could gain from either of them.

She finished her work, dressed and got outside. In the past it didn't bother her to leave. She liked spending time in stores along Novyy Arbat, if they were still open, gawking at things and food. She had no money of her own and faithfully gave every bit of change back to Yulia after she got done shopping, but sometimes she stole things. It was easy to tuck them under her coat, especially now that she was pregnant. But after seeing Roma's gang pay Pavlik's building a visit, she didn't like the idea of getting out. It got dark early, around four in the afternoon. She didn't trust the shadows on the street, didn't trust anyone, jumping at every noise. So she decided to wait it out and hide behind trees by the parking lot, for as long as she could without freezing, to see who it was so important that she had to be kicked out of the house.

Typically Anton's business associates came over in nice cars, sometimes Yulia's old mother in a taxi, which was rare. Yulia usually went to see her in her own flat in one of the older Moscow neighborhoods. Anton didn't visit anyone, his parents were dead. Sometimes family friends came, a few other times actors from Pavlik's troupe came to visit, and that was mostly it. New year was just around the corner, and Irka wondered if they would let her celebrate it with them or she'd be asked to leave again. She'd probably go visit her mother, she badly wanted to see her, on the off chance that Lyosha would be too drunk to throw a scene.

A long sparkly clean luxury car of Western make crunched to a stop. Irka perked up, spying from behind a tree. A familiar floating mass of scarves and perfume filed out. Sim Novy himself. Irka gasped, covering her mouth with a mitten. He had a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a bulging bag in another, swiftly making his way to the entranceway and disappearing inside. It made sense. Pavlik was probably being promoted. He talked about this new play Sim staged, excited at the possibility of participating in it, now that his wound has fully healed.

A minute later, Anton's car rolled from around the corner. He parked it neatly and carefully, as always, opened the door

for Pavlik, who hopped out, by the look of it very nervous. They hastily walked inside *pod'yezd*, slamming the door.

Irka felt left out, gazing up at the windows, trying to imagine what was happening inside. Her toes tingled, so did the tips of her fingers and nose. She hopped from foot to foot, trying to warm herself. Another hour, and she'd run a chance of falling sick. Did Yulia really care for the baby or was it all pretense, sending her outside to freeze like that? Of course, Yulia didn't know Irka would stay on the street. Irka waited until she couldn't wait anymore. She lost all feeling in her legs and she needed to pee, bad. She quickly trotted over to the entranceway and opened the door at the same time as Sim reached for the handle from inside, Pavlik right behind him.

"Irina!" He exclaimed in his larger than life manner. "What a pleasant surprise. Long time no see. What are you doing here at this hour, my sweet pussy?"

"You're freezing!" Exclaimed Pavlik, pulling her in.

Irka didn't realize her teeth were chattering.

"Were you standing outside the whole time?" Asked Pavlik. "Mama said you went for—" He caught himself, looking at Sim, whose eyebrows shifted upward.

"No-no-no, please, continue. I'm most interested to hear the rest. Perhaps we should make it a special outing, to show the girl how it's properly done?" There was mocking in his

voice. "Sugar bird, how would you like to go to a lavish place with candlelight, sparking wine, and heavenly sweeties? Taste exquisite food fit for Russian tsars, hmm? My treat. What do you say? It'll warm up those juicy buttocks. They must be blue by now." He cracked up, an expression of delight stealing over his face. But when he glanced at Pavlik, a drastic change took place.

Pavlik shrunk under his stare.

"In the car, flowers of my life, in the car!" He boomed, scooping both kids on either side. "Let us hit nightly Moscow, let us revel under its lights, let us eat and drink to the beauty of art! To the genius of theater! To the glory of its creator, your humble servant."

Irka sunk into the leather seat, unable to think about anything but how not to wet herself, barely looking out the windows or paying attention to Sim boasting about his new purchase, this car, about his new play, about the food they were going to eat, seemingly talking to fill up the awkward silence. Pavlik sat tense and quiet, obviously unhappy about something, but what, Irka couldn't tell.

The first thing she did as they arrived at an extravagantly festooned restaurant in the old center of Moscow was run to the restroom and relieve herself, ogling the wall décor, the lamps, the towels provided for drying hands after washing. She hasn't

seen luxury like this, and considered stealing a towel or two, there were that thick and soft.

When she joined Sim and Pavlik at the table, they were deep into a heated argument, their faces scary in the candle light, their voices harsh yet controlled. Or, rather, Sim's voice was controlled, and Pavlik's subdued. Irka looked around. The restaurant wasn't very busy. There were a few couples seated here and there. One table was occupied by a large party of men in expensive suits. They laughed and talked loudly, the new Russians, the new money, young, rich, and arrogant. They ordered the waitress around, attempting to snatch at her ass every time she came too close, roaring like donkeys when she twisted out of their grasp.

Irka startled when the waiter took off her coat, and plopped into the chair, brushing bangs away, feeling fat and bloated with her belly and hand-me-down clothes. She placed elbows on the table and cupped her face, expecting Pavlik and Sim to continue. People typically did, ignoring her presence.

But neither Sim nor Pavlik said anything from the moment she surfaced, only glaring at each other. In the end, Sim won. Pavlik dropped his gaze.

"There you are." Boasted Sim. "We thought you decided to make out with the chef and leave us here, all alone, deprived of

your saucy charm, pussy pie." He took her hand and kissed it theatrically.

Irka blushed.

Suddenly, Sim stopped. "Exquisite filigree. Where did you get this?" He studied one of her fingers.

Irka didn't understand at first what he meant.

Pavlik craned his neck to see. "I believe it's Irina's mother's wedding ring, right, Irina? She gave it to her for safekeeping. Reminds me of something papa used to make, before apprentices took over. Very difficult to carve. Papa gave up after a while, said it wasn't worth the time, low return on investment. Do you know who did this? Did your mother ever tell you?" He studied Irka.

She turned red, shaking her head. She lied to Pavlik, not daring to tell him she stole it, writing short sentences as answers to his questions about her life before theater, which she didn't want to talk about, wishing to forget it altogether.

"Stunning work. Why did she give it to you for safekeeping?" Said Sim, still holding Irka's hand.

Irka shrugged, hoping to avoid explanation.

"Sim. It's a delicate matter, something of a personal pain for Irina. I can tell you later, if you'd like."

"Very much so. Please do. Gorgeous ring, simply gorgeous."

"It is, isn't it?" Picked up Pavlik eagerly. "I'll ask papa who made it, if you're interested. I'm sure he'll know where you can get it done, maybe make one himself. For you. If you'd like." Said Pavlik, fidgeting.

Satisfied, Sim let go of Irka's hand.

She tensed, stroking the ring under the table. Why were they talking about something that belonged to her, without asking her if it was okay to show it to someone? Maybe she didn't want them to. Once again, she burned with desire to speak.

"I'm sorry, Irina." Said Pavlik. "Would it be okay if I asked papa about your ring? I apologize I neglected to ask for your permission."

Irka shrugged.

"I hope you wouldn't mind me sharing what little I know about your past with Sim? Sim expressed interest, of course, because he likes to know people before inviting them to work with him."

Irka kindled with hope. Was there a chance for her to get onstage again? Her heart fluttered. Pavlik read her like nobody else. But then she descended into pain again. How she wished he loved her, how she yearned for it, only of course it wasn't possible.

Sim grilled her with a strange stare, before glancing down at his hands, encrusted with large rings. He was fond of rings, rings and scarves. Well, he was fond of fine fancy things in general, but rings and scarves especially.

"Yes, yes, why don't you ask him. I'd like to know." He said absentmindedly, picking up the menu and composing his face. "I recommend you choose your dinners, honey pots. We've got lots to cover tonight, with Pavlik being the star of my new show." He reached out and tapped the boy on the shoulder.

Pavlik smiled shyly.

Irka sensed something odd. She wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but Sim's touch suggested more than simple friendliness, something bordering on intimacy. She shook her head, dismissing it. Since she learned Pavlik was gay, she saw it everywhere. That's what it was. She opened the menu and hid behind it, reading.

Chapter 23. The Dinner

They ate at a Georgian restaurant, as it stated in the menu. Always hungry, Irka ordered too much and now stuffed her face with Georgian version of *pelmeni*, lamb *hinkali*, fried cheese, bean soufflé with pomegranate sauce and other delicacies, until she couldn't fit any more food and belched.

Pavlik snorted, pretending he choked on a piece of bread.

"Poor muffin. Didn't mama teach you manners?" Said Sim, touching her hand.

Irka jerked away, sensing keen interest.

Sim hasn't touched her before. His fingers were cold and soft. There was a curious shift in his demeanor, from mocking to capitalize on his own importance to genuine curiosity, like she stopped being a piece of mere entertainment and became an object to dissect, to see if there was a seed of talent hiding inside, or something like that. Irka couldn't understand what brought the change.

Sim sipped a red drink, swirling it around in the glass, delicately holding it by the stem. "Well, Pavlik here told me what you were doing in his house, you naughty naughty girl. He's got a sweet cock, doesn't he?" Sim cackled.

"Sim." Whispered Pavlik.

"Pregnant at sixteen, you must love him very much. Or is it his cock that you love? What is it, sugar bomb, boy or cock? Boy, I'd say. Gorgeous thing like Pavlik, why, I'd fall to his feet myself." Sim tousled Pavlik's cheek.

Pavlik sat motionless, horrified. "Sim." He pleaded. "You promised."

"What? You think your friend is blind? You're not giving her enough credit. She's more perceptive than you and I together. Perceptive and silent, two virtues I love in a woman." Sim snapped his fingers. "Waiter! Another one of these. Less tomato, more vodka. Move your pussy, darling. Move it!"

The waiter, a nervous thin young man, ran up to their table, bowed, and was off with the empty glass, only to resurface minutes later with a new one.

Sim downed it in one gulp and slammed a fist on the table, humming some tune. He was getting tipsy. Irka shifted uneasily, not looking forward to the ride home, especially in the snow.

"Sim, please. No more." Pavlik placed a hand on Sim's arm, who grinned and kissed it with a loud smooch. "To the future father." He raised the glass, then realized it was empty. "Waiter!" Then added. "A gift that's never been bestowed upon me. Or has it?" He lurched at Irka, who shifted away. "What's

your full name, sweetie? You must have a loud name, a name worthy of stage, of the audience presence. Go on, tell me!"

Irka stared at Pavlik for help.

"Marinova." Said Pavlik quietly. "Her full name is Irina Marinova."

"Marinova? Nice. Marinova." He boomed, swaying slightly. "That's not all of it, is it? What's your middle name?"

Irka looked at Pavlik. He called the waiter, whispered into his ear. The waiter ran off and scurried back with a piece of paper and a pen. Irka wrote, *Marinova Irina Gerasimovna*, and handed it to Sim. He snatched it out of her hand and read it for a long time, moving lips soundlessly, as if she didn't write one line but a whole essay. It seemed to have a sobering effect on him.

"What did you say your mother's name was?" He said, belching.

Marina. Wrote Irka.

"Does she... do your parents know where you are? Aren't they looking for you? Don't you miss them?" Sim's eyes darted between Irka and Pavlik. They exchanged a glance, forging an unspoken agreement.

"Sim, Irina lives with her mother. She is... she has a drinking problem. She doesn't know where Irina is, no. And her

father... he left before she was born, right after her parents married." Said Pavlik. "Did I say it right?" He looked at Irka.

She confirmed his words with a nod.

"He left, eh? Fucking bastard." Sim slapped on the table so that the plates rattled. His heavy shape shifted and he caught himself in time by sticking out a foot, for balance. "You're following your father's steps, I presume? Good girl. Who needs to be reminded of a drunkard's ineptitude? Alcohol is for the weak. You're a strong girl, I can see that. I want to help you. Kiss goodbye to Marinova. What kind of stage name is that? Primitive, fit for plebs. Change it to Boim. Much more spectacular sounding. Pavel and Irina Boim, presented by Sim Novy. Why, I ought to write a new play just for you two." He roared at his own joke.

Pavlik held on to his face.

Irka couldn't understand where Sim's rage came from. She only knew that if they stayed here longer, he would drink himself senseless and they would end up without a ride. Moscow metro closed by one in the morning. It was close to midnight. Irka's eyes felt dry, she kept blinking and yawning. The baby kicked and kicked, restless. It was a long day, and she thought she wouldn't be able to survive walking in the cold. Her legs ached, she ate too much, and she wanted to rest.

"Sim, let's go, Sim. It's time. We have rehearsal tomorrow." Pavlik said nervously.

"That's right. You're right. Go call your *mamochka*, she must be worried." Sim waved Pavlik off, who stood and walked over to the restaurant entrance, where a waiter greeted those coming and going by the booth. It had a phone. Pavlik picked it up and dialed.

Irka was left with Sim, who stared at her without blinking.

"I decided. I'll give you a role. I'll write you a role. Don't disappoint me. You have talent, I sense it, it's in your genes." Strangely serious, he reached out to her but paused and retracted his hand, as if ashamed.

Irka nodded, puzzled.

Without waiting for the bill, Sim left a wad of cash on the table, got dressed and exited into the night, Pavlik and Irka on his heels.

It warmed up. Thick snow blobs covered the ground in a layer of white.

Sim stopped by the car and howled, grabbing at his scarf and tugging it. "*Blyadi!* Whores! Fucking whores! Scum! Low lives! What hideous bitch has bred you, you moronic leeches!" He yelled and yelled, employing his full arsenal of profanities.

Pavlik and Irka ran up, to see what the deal was.

A pile of something dark sat in the middle of the car's hood. It was steaming. It stunk. Irka looked closer. Someone defecated on top of Sim's car, recently, by the look of it. The crap hasn't cooled down yet, melting the snow around it.

Sim continued cursing. Irka and Pavlik, by an unspoken solidarity, scooped handfuls of snow and dumped it on top of feces until they were covered, then flung them off the hood. The mess plopped down, leaving a hideous smear behind it. They dowsed the car with snow, swept it off, and kept repeating it until the car got clean.

Irka's mittens were soaking wet. She flung them on top of the pile they made. Pavlik rubbed his hands. He didn't wear gloves or mittens. Irka took his hands into hers, to warm them. So they stood for a few minutes, waiting for Sim to calm down.

Pavlik's eyes filled with tears. "I think I know who did this. It's my fault." He said.

Irka tugged on his hands, but Pavlik wouldn't say more.

Sim, still yelling, walked back to the restaurant.

"Sim, where are you going?" Called Pavlik.

Minutes later, the director surfaced, dragging the restaurant manager with him to show the dung pile. Sim demanded he called militia, to which the manager, a pot-bellied bald man, replied, that all militia was bought by mafia a long time ago

and that calling them won't do any good. Sim spat, strode around the car, got in and started it.

Pavlik and Irka jumped in, barely closing the doors, as Sim already pushed on gas and was reversing, closely avoiding a streetlight, then tearing into the street, weaving. Irka closed her eyes, holding on to Pavlik for dear life. She hoped that if they died, they died together, or at least she died and Pavlik lived, because she couldn't imagine her life without him. She decided it didn't matter that he was gay, she could live with that. She loved him for who he was as a person. It didn't matter that he preferred boys. It was nothing, really. He didn't beat her, didn't rape her, touched her gently, and he said he loved her, like a sister. That was enough, thought Irka, enough for her and the baby.

Sim swore under his breath and swerved, so all of them lurched to one side.

"What is it?" Cried Pavlik, following Sim's gaze into the back mirror and twisting around to see. Irka did the same.

"I suspected this. You'd have to spend the night at my place, sweets, both of you. We're being followed." Said Sim matter-of-factly.

"Followed by who?" Said Pavlik, wiping the back window with his sleeve, to see better.

"Who do you think, peach pie?"

Irka peered into darkness. It was late and there wasn't much traffic in this part of town. Behind them, closing in, sped a black car. She couldn't decipher who sat by the wheel or how many people were inside, but whoever drove it was definitely bent on shrinking the distance between them. Snow flew from under its tires. The car flashed its lights, unashamedly acknowledging the chase. It was a game, the rules of which Irka didn't know, but it seemed like Sim and Pavlik did.

"Again?" Said Pavlik.

"You thought they'll just leave you off the hook? No, sweetie pie, their dicks will be riddled with impotence. This is what gets them hard. I don't want them to find out where you live, if I can help it. They do know where I live, poor wankers." Snapped Sim, taking a tight turn.

They do, Irka wanted to say, not exactly knowing why.

Tires screeched. Pavlik toppled on her, neither of them buckled. She cried out. His elbow landed on her belly.

"Sorry, sorry! I'm so sorry! Did I hit you hard?"

"Hold on!" Yelled Sim, and pressed the gas pedal into the floor. They ran a red light and sped into *Sadovoe koltso*, a wide street that circled Moscow downtown, the old city from the center of which radiated all of its major arterial routes.

The black car hung on to their tail.

Buildings flew by. Irka thought back to the guys she saw in Pavlik's building, her gut telling her these things were connected, her mind struggling to understand how. She had to warn Pavlik, had to tell him.

Red and blue lights flashed behind them, joined by a siren.

"Militia." Said Sim. "Excellent. Just what I was hoping for."

Immediately, the black car that pursued them dropped speed and turned away into some side street.

Sim slowed down and stopped by the curb.

Astounded, Irka witnessed him file out, greet the militant like an old friend, take out a roll of cash, slip it into his hand, crack a joke or two. The militant laughed, saluted to Sim and was off.

Sim filed back. "Expensive dinner, darlings. Don't know about you, but I feel like getting out of these shoes and clothes. Shall we?" He started the engine and they were off, cruising deeper into the maze of sleepy boulevards.

Chapter 24. Sim's Lair

Irka stepped in with reverence. Something about Sim's flat instilled a sense of awe in her. Yes, Pavlik's apartment was clean and tidy and stuffed with costly things like rugs and chandeliers, but it was nothing like Sim's. It resided on the top floor of an old *osobnyak*, a neoclassic building built at the turn of the century, an example of upper class architecture. Surrounded by a fence, the building graced one of Moscow's central downtown streets. It had a fenced parking lot and a concierge, a dry old man with a mustache, who let them in, bowing, calling Sim by his name and handing him a newspaper.

Irka has visited *Kuskovo*, the summer estate of the Sheremetev family, gawking at its endless string of halls. This reminded her of that. The corridor stretched ahead, with doors on the left and on the right, in between them walls covered with heavy frames. Paintings, mirrors, photographs, more paintings. And music. There was classical music. As soon as they entered, it started playing on its own accord, small speakers mounted close to the ceiling.

Sim strolled in, threw his coat on the floor, keys on the entrance table, kicked off his shoes and donned slippers, turning into one of the rooms. "Coffee? Tea?" He called.

Pavlik helped Irka with her coat, putting it on a hanger in a wardrobe by the door. She could tell he's been here before, moving about with knowledge and confidence.

"Come on." He took her by the hand.

They entered the kitchen. It sparkled with chrome. Bottles of liquor and half-eaten food was everywhere. It looked good and expensive. Irka saw sliced ham, smoked fish, all kinds of cheeses. Her stomach rumbled, she was hungry again. Low windows overlooked a busy Moscow street, with windowsills wide enough to sit on. A few pillows lay scattered on them.

Sim stood by an elaborate coffee machine, humming a tune.

"*Blyadi chertovy*. Devil's whores. Uneducated hooligans." He said without turning, tasting the coffee. "Not the first time, not the last. Jealous of the art of love, what, with their cocks too soft to get a decent pussy."

"But Sim—" Began Pavlik.

"You think I haven't seen shit in my life? Why, I see it everyday, *malchik moy*, my boy, coming right out my old lovely *zadnica*." Sim slapped himself on the ass and cracked up. "Let's worry about this girl over here. Sounds like you've had a rough life."

Irka blushed. She didn't like being the center of attention, it made her feel uncomfortable and unworthy.

"*Hochesh?* Want to be in a play?" Pressed Sim. He raised his voice, speaking comically. "A pregnant maiden escaped an evil tyrant, only to fall into the clutches of a criminal dictator." He slurped coffee, studying the girl.

"Are you serious?" Interjected Pavlik. "If you aren't, if you're being sarcastic, it will only hurt her—"

"Your low opinion of your director saddens me, Pavlik love. Take my word for it. I'm trying to do good here. I think I have something, don't you think? I think I'll write you in." Sim's eyes blazed with excitement.

Irka sensed that his game shifted, but still didn't know if it was genuine care, her past experiences making her guarded.

"Off you go. Both of you. I must think. Pavlik, you know where to put Irina. Show her in. *Davay, davay*, move it." Sim dropped on a pillow, cracked the window open and started a cigarette, tugging on it and passing air between tightened lips.

Pavlik took Irka by the elbow, leading her into one of the rooms. It was decked out in mirrors. A large bed stood in the middle, blankets in disarray, pillows everywhere, carelessly thrown around as if several people slept here and forgot to tidy up. Irka ran her fingers on one. It was covered in silk.

"You'll be on your own?" Asked Pavlik.

Irka grabbed both his arms, not letting go.

"What is it?" He asked.

Irka only looked and looked.

Pavlik sighed and gave her a peck on the cheek. "It's fine. Don't mind Sim. He's in one of those moods. Hates his things being treated with disrespect. This hasn't happened before. It's my fault. I—there are—jealous people. Jealous of his fame. Jealous of our—our working relationship. They think I'm his protégé, think it's not fair, you know." He said it quickly.

Irka knew he lied. She didn't want to think what she started thinking, chasing it away, letting him go.

Pavlik quietly clicked the door shut behind him.

For the next several hours Irka honestly tried sleeping, drifting in and out of dozing. She thought she heard crying, at some point somebody moaned, she couldn't tell if from pain or pleasure, then all was still. At last, she nodded off, waking up from to the sun shining in her face.

She bolted up, sliding down. Her bladder was about to burst, and she was hungry, ravenously hungry.

A smell of fried eggs and ham drifted under the door.

Irka opened it, wondering if everything in this apartment was new or simply taken care of. Nothing creaked, nor the door, nor the parquet boards. She tiptoed to the kitchen and was about to enter, when her heart stopped.

She stood, watching, bolted to the floor.

Sim leaned over Pavlik, pressing his stomach into the counter. Sim's hand, rings shining on it in the sun, massaged Pavlik's ass, occasionally sliding in between his tights. Irka couldn't see the expression on either of their faces, but by the way Pavlik tipped his head back she could tell he liked it. Sim rubbed his broad shape against Pavlik's delicate one, grunting into his ear, whispering something, a cup of steaming coffee in his other hand.

She would've stood like this for an eternity, if not for Pavlik. He sensed her presence and jerked to look. Sim followed his gaze and without a beat slapped the boy's butt with a showmanship worthy of a spectacular performance, breaking into a grin as if nothing out of the ordinary happened.

"*Dobroe utro!* Irinochka, sugar mama, how did you sleep, my sweet pussy? Would you like to take a bath first, or join us for breakfast?" He closed his housecoat in one broad swoop, and hobbled over to the table, setting down his coffee. Irka noticed he was naked underneath, naked and hairy. It brought back memories and she gagged, bending down.

"No-no-no, birdy love, not here. Pavlik, show her to the bath." Sim slurped his coffee, while Pavlik rushed to Irka and led her to the bathroom.

He shut the door, gently putting her on the closed toilet seat.

Irka looked up. She rarely cried, rarely let herself feel, pushing down her emotions to survive. It didn't work now, no matter how hard she tried. He betrayed her, betrayed her twice. The fact that Pavlik never promised her anything, never told her he'd be with her and her alone didn't cross Irka's mind. She nurtured this fantasy, this mythology she created, and now it crumbled. Kostik was fine, Kostik was okay. Kostik was love, and love had the right to exist. Pure love. But this... this was malicious, unsavory, perverted. This was like Lyosha and her. Somehow Irka couldn't bear thinking about Pavlik succumbing to someone else like she did to her mother's alcoholic boyfriend. In her mind, Pavlik was gorgeous and strong. She held on to this belief, for sanity. It took only minutes. The image of him being stronger than her got destroyed by what she just witnessed. Tears spilled on their own accord, stealthily. She let them roll.

Pavlik held her face, silent. He opened his mouth a couple times and closed it again, unable to make a sound. "It's not what it looks like." He finally managed. "It's just that... If you only knew. Mama and papa..." He broke off. Water brimmed in his eyes. "We want to immigrate to Israel. We don't know when it will be possible. Might be months, might be years. I can't wait

that long. There is no place for me here, in Russia, do you understand what I'm saying? For me, for people like me, for gays. I want to go to America. Sim said he'll take me. This summer. They'll kill me, Irina, if I won't get out of here, they'll kill me." He wiped his face.

Who they? She mouthed.

Pavlik grabbed a piece of toilet paper and delicately blew his nose, holding himself together. "You don't want to know." He studied himself in the mirror. A memory must have struck him, because he suddenly crumbled, speaking in high voice. "They called me a faggot, a queer dick, a cock cunt. They..." He buried his face in Irka's breasts, breaking into sobs.

She held him, first stroking his hair, then rocking him gently. The both cried quietly, holding each other.

A knock on the door started them.

"Have you drowned in there? Coming or not? Breakfast is getting cold. I'm not your mama to reheat it for you. Move your pussies. I don't want to be late for rehearsal."

Irka ate her eggs, chewing them like tasteless plastic. Pavlik acted happy and sunny, the talented actor that he was. Irka couldn't do it. Dark thoughts swirled in her mind. He was leaving her. Sooner or later, he was going to leave her. So what if they married, he'd leave country. She'd be stuck alone with the baby. Him and Sim had an affair, there was no place for

Irka. She understood now the rivalry between Kostik and Pavlik, Kostik's pleading. Sim fucked them all, for his pleasure, picking favorites and playing them against each other.

Disgusted, Irka looked at Sim with such hate, he choked.

"Excellent emotion, darling." He sing-sang. "Now, I want you to bottle it up and spill it on the stage, kitty cat. Can you do this for me, can you do this for poor old Sim, can you bring me joy with your abundance of a talent?"

Irka didn't know how she finished breakfast, walking out on wooden legs, getting into the car and getting out by the back entrance into the theater. She was here again, she could retrieve her backpack and return the stolen coat. She took a deep breath and followed Pavlik, moving legs automatically.

Chapter 25. The New Play

There was no sign of Ilinichna. The girl with brightly painted mouth occupied the booth like last time. She jumped at the sight of Irka, but Sam calmed her down, saying Irka was part of the troupe now in need of a pass. Same went for Vladimir Konkin who met them on the way, sternly asking what a thief was doing in his theater, to which Sim reassured him that he would personally speak to Terekhova and apologize, since the girl only meant to borrow the coat, nothing more. Despite her hate, Irka started feeling gratitude toward Sim. As imperfect as he was, he took her under his wing, and suddenly doors opened for her. She was treated like a real actress, and for the moment her worries got overshadowed by giddiness. She was going to be in a real play!

She was allowed to share the dressing room with Pavlik. Her backpack hung on the wall, on the hook, where she left it. She snatched it, studying the contents. Everything was there, including the passport.

Next hour Irka and Pavlik spent quietly, reading the script.

Pavlik seemed to be in a grim state, turning page after page, mouthing words, standing up and delivering his lines to

the mirror without much zeal. Irka gathered her courage, and finally decided to do it. She had to warn him.

They know where you live. She wrote on the page of the script and tapped Pavlik on the shoulder when he seemed to be taking a short break from memorizing by ruffling through costumes.

"Not right now, please, I'm trying to concentrate." He shook her hand off.

Irka insisted.

"What is it?" He snapped.

Irka jumped away. She had rarely seen him irritated, and it frightened her. With people whom she didn't care for much she was able to turn herself off and let negativity wash over her like water over a duck, but once she tuned in to someone, she couldn't simply ignore that person, acting as a way of strings on a guitar, as if acquiring an ability to tune in to their emotional distress. Pavlik currently tuned her mood. She tried to understand what she might've done wrong to upset him. It's like she herself didn't exist. Her sole purpose consisted of interpreting his wishes and fulfilling them. She suspected it came from being used since childhood, angry at her constant mood swings yet powerless to withstand them. For example, this morning she loved Pavlik, then decided to break this love out of despair, and now she loved him again, watching his cheeks flush.

"Did I make a mistake? In my lines?" Pavlik softened, taking the script out of her hands. His face clouded. "Who they? What are you talking about? You don't know who you're talking about!" He slammed the script on the floor.

Irka hugged herself, in order not to fall apart. How could she explain? It was only a hunch. She wanted to help, but, as always, the effect was opposite from what she hoped for. It would take her too long to write it all out, not she knew what to write in the first place. She shook her head, pointing at herself.

Pavlik cooled down. "I'm sorry, Irina. Please, forgive me my outburst." He passed a hand through his hair. "If you mean the morons who marred Sim's car... I don't think it was related to me. Sim, most likely. I—you see—nobody knows about us. Kostik suspected, but he didn't know for sure. I know you can't talk, I know you won't tell anyone, but can I ask you without you getting angry at me?"

Irk nodded affirmatively.

"Please, keep it under wraps? I'll help you, you'll help me, okay? Sorry, but I'm only eighteen. I don't know how to be a father, nor do I know if I ever want to be one. In the unlikely event that I do, I don't think I want to raise my child in this despicable country. I'm sure you'll agree with me."

Irka searched his eyes. What was so terrible about raising the child here?

"I wouldn't want my child to have its freedom taken before it was given a chance to choose. It's like... being born into prison. In a way, in a way I think it might've been better if you did an abortion."

Irka shook her head so vigorously, she felt dizzy.

"Please." Pavlik looked into her eyes. "Please, understand where I'm coming from. I only mean you well. I can't love you, Irina. Not like you want me to. I can't simply snap my fingers and change myself to fall in love with you."

Irka had to sit down. She felt behind her for a chair, pulled it closer and slammed into it, slouching.

"Listen." Pavlik fell to his knees next to her. "We'll do each other a favor. I'll marry you. Everyone will think the baby is mine. That way you're clean, no matter who the father was. People will see a child born of our union, they won't think I'm gay. I'll look perfectly straight in their eyes. Then you can tell everyone that I left country on tour. Time will go by, people will forget things."

Irka nodded, miserable. Of course, what else could she expect? That some knight on a white horse would show up and lay his heart at her feet? It didn't work like this, did it? There was no true love in this world, was there? It belonged to fairy

tales, to stupid TV soap operas that her great grandmother Nadezhda watched all day long. It wasn't real. In real life, people used each other for their personal gain, either by mutual agreement, or, if it didn't work, taking things by force. At least that was Irka's experience. Why would Pavlik be any different? Yet she sensed he was. He couldn't be as corrupt as Lyosha or Sim, could he? He was only eighteen.

"What do you say?" Prompted Pavlik.

Irka thought. *I have to think of the baby, I have to think of the baby. Nothing else matters. My life doesn't matter, my happiness doesn't matter.* She didn't move.

"Irina, please." Pavlik cajoled her. "It's the best I can do. It's the best we can do for each other, under the circumstances. Think about it. Wouldn't you agree?"

Irka nodded again.

"If you must know, I don't like it. It's—Sim is—I tolerate it. To get out of here. I don't care how, I just want out. With Kostik gone, there is nothing left for me here." He blinked, looking away.

Irka pulled on his script. Pavlik fetched her a pen. She wrote. *I understand. I'm game.*

"You're the best. Thank you. *Spasibo.*" In the flow of emotions, Pavlik kissed her on the lips. It wasn't a real kiss, more of a peck, but Irka savored every second of it. Since she

lost all hope of ever being loved by a man for who she was, not for the use of her body, every touch from Pavlik gave her craving for love a little satisfaction. She was positive she could survive on it. And when he left, well, she'd figure out what to do then. Until then, she decided she was happy with what she got.

Right on cue, there was an urgent knock on the door.

Without an invitation to enter, Sim barged in. "Making me wait, love birds. What is this?" He raised his eyebrows.

Pavlik jumped to his feet, scooping up the script from the floor. "We're... rehearsing, Sim."

"I don't recall this scene in my play." Sim said, frowning. "Improvising, my pussies?" A shadow passed his face, then he was back to his normal exuberant self, scooping both kids into powerful arms.

"We need to talk about something important, children. I trust you, Irina, understand that the boundaries of love cease to exist when you enter the realm of art. You see, theater defies social norms, it allows us to bloom into who we want to become. It wouldn't be possible if actors imposed boundaries on themselves, would it? We must feel the full range of human emotion, in order to create from it. We must suffer, to understand it. Art is born out of love, is it not? We all love each other, you see?"

By crapping on each other's cars? I suppose that's love of the highest class. Thought Irka, wishing she could say it. She reached for the pen, but by the time her fingers touched it, she forgot how she wanted to articulate it.

"Just this morning I felt the desire to love Pavlik, and Pavlik felt the desire to love me. A beautiful union was created, but for a moment. You, my darling, interrupted it. I forgive you. I intend to teach you. You must commit to being pliable by my genius, if you want to learn how to act." His breath smelled of expensive cigarettes, and Irka found it annoying. Of course, it was nothing like Lyosha's alcohol breath, but still.

"Is there a place in your heart to love me?" Pressed Sim.

"Sim, I think she understands. I think you're overdoing it a bit." Said Pavlik cautiously, edging out of director's hold.

"No, you're not going anywhere. Sit. I'm not done yet. Once I deliver my desire, I don't like to repeat myself. I want you both to remember that. Acting is a divine privilege, and it must be handled as such." He gave Irka a stern look.

"There isn't much I can offer you." He continued, twiddling with his silk neckerchief. "However, I think I found you the part. You will play the victim of our hero here." He motioned to Pavlik. "You'll play his knocked up mute girlfriend. Very close

to life. I'm so good, I astound myself." He stood, fixing his suit and looking himself over in the mirror.

"Is that a *thank you* I hear?" He prompted them.

"Thank you, Sim." Said Pavlik.

Irka nodded.

"Splendid. You can take the rest of the day off. I'm not prepared to see you onstage, my head is splitting. Have to write you in, sugar pie. Go ahead, enjoy each other's company. I want you to bond. Shoo. Get out of my sight. Oh, and Pavlik," he rummaged in his pockets and produced a few crisp banknotes. "Buy her a new coat, will you? I had to return the other one to Terekhova. Tomorrow morning, nine o'clock sharp. Both of you."

And with that, he strolled out.

Irka looked at Pavlik, he shrugged.

"Typical Sim. He's not as bad as he looks. He's very caring. You'll see. Trust me."

Irka bit her lip, thinking how simple her life was before, and how complicated it got, without her understanding much of it, especially why people hurt each other, then called it love.

Chapter 26. To Ilinichna

Pavlik left Irka in his dressing room and came back an hour later with a white down coat. Irka reached for it, felt it, sniffed it. It smelled new. She tried it on. In Marinova household things quickly acquired a grey quality, no matter what color they were to begin with. Her mother rarely bought her clothes, and when she did, they were the same for every other girl in Soviet Union, same dress, same shoes, same school uniform. Marina had to stand in long lines to get it, sometimes without regard to the size, happy she was able to buy clothes in the first place. In the new Russia, wares from overseas slowly crept in, but they sold for astronomical prices, as compared to domestic products. Irka didn't want to know how much this coat cost or where Pavlik got it, she zipped it up and fell in love.

"Looks great." Pavlik turned her around. "What do you think?" He led her to the mirror. Irka didn't recognize herself. Her face flushed, she had to admit, she looked nice. Even cute, maybe. She brushed off her bangs. They were getting long and got in her face. The coat bulged on her belly, reaching to her knees. She pulled on the strings at the bottom and put on the

hood. She resembled a pupa, a matryoshka doll wrapped in white, so bright, so clean, she had to shield her eyes.

"You like it? *Slava bogu*. I was so worried." Pavlik fussed around her.

Irka beamed, circling around, feeling sweat roll down her back. It was very warm inside the theater. Like most Moscow buildings, it was heated from the central heating system that pumped hot water through pipes, operated from a centralized *kontora*. It was one of those post-Soviet era miracles that remained alive for the time being. Plenty of heat and hardly any cost, the only drawback being the shutoff of the warm water for one month in the summer in all Moscow neighborhoods on a rotating basis, prompting people to visit friends on the other side of the city to take a shower or go to *banya*, Russian style sauna where people hit each other with *veniks*, bundled birch branches soaked in boiling water.

"Well, we're free. What do you want to do?" Asked Pavlik.

Irka shrugged. She wasn't used to being asked for her opinion on making plans. Whatever it is she wanted to, was always overridden by somebody else's will. She got accustomed to it so much that the thought of being able to want something on her own rarely entered her mind. She stared at Pavlik, confused, trying to come up with an idea.

"I don't feel like going home, do you?" He asked.

Irka shook her head. The prospect of facing Yulia with her incessant questions and directives didn't excite her.

"*Otlichno*. How about we go visit Ilinichna, if you don't mind? She had a stroke and a heart attack. Konkin told me." Pavlik's face got long. "Must've been hard on her, hearing about Kostik. The loss of her daughter and everything."

Irka took his hand.

"Well, this is it." He winked, "you and I," and offered Irka his arm.

She took it. They emerged into the corridor and sauntered up the stairs to the exit like a proper couple.

Irka didn't mind it being fake. She justified it to herself with acting. She had to practice, to act, to become an actress. This union presented itself to her like a perfect opportunity. And she might as well enjoy it while it lasted. Who knew when she'd get another chance like this, if at all. *Life is short*, Irka thought, *I'll take from it what it gives me now. When I'm old, when my teeth fall out, I'll have something to remember it by.*

A few actors met them on the way, greeting, ogling at Irka's stomach, asking questions. Pavlik, with his fine mannerisms, excused himself from keeping it a secret and admitted to true love, to the baby being his, to him marrying Irka soon.

By the time they made it to concierge, she already knew. "When's the wedding?" She called, applying lipstick. "Am I invited? I better be." She smacked her lips, studying them in the pocket mirror. It was a habitual occurrence at any Russian workplace to assume that whatever family affair transpired within its wall, or, for that matter, outside them, the rest of the coworkers had the inexplicable right to participate in it, without a question or doubt. By default. It was an all or nothing philosophy. You either didn't interact with people, being put off by their sordid faces, or you interacted and got their whole life dumped on you as a result.

"Yes, of course, Galina." Said Pavlik reluctantly. "Everyone is invited."

Irka's heart did a somersault. She thought of a wedding dress, a ride in a limousine, or, rather, Russian version of a limousine, a government car *Chaika*, a celebration in a restaurant, and her happy thoughts pushed sad ones out of her mind. After all, she was only sixteen, and it was easy to get lost in a dream, even after she promised herself not to dream anymore.

Lightweight, barely feeling her feet, she floated after Pavlik. They got Ilinichna flowers, stopped by a bakery, bought her small elaborate cake for tea, and set off on the journey to reach her tiny flat at the South end of Moscow. Irka didn't

register the passage of time, relishing the hours spent in company of Pavlik, beaming when people looked at them as a couple, when one man offered her a seat in an overflowing with people metro train. It usually took several hours to cross Moscow from one end to another, regardless of the method of transportation. In some cases it was better to take the subway, as the streets were congested at any time of the day, in any direction, if not by traffic, then by commonly happening accidents. People drove without any regard to the rules, crossing lines in one solid mass, relying on the survival of the fittest. The bolder, the louder, the angrier you were, the more chances you had of making it across the city faster or getting out of a sticky situation. Of course, bribes were required on every corner, the bread and butter of the low paid Moscow militia patrolling the streets.

Irka didn't want their ride to end.

She snuggled next to Pavlik and dared to put her head on his shoulder, dozing off. He shook her awake. They squeezed out, making their way through the mass of bodies, up the escalator, bypassing the many subway kiosks selling everything from *chebureki*, Russian style pastries with meat inside, to books, to slippers and housecoats, to jackets, VHS tapes, CD's and other questionable products that once you bought generally fell apart, with the only option for the customer left to go back and yell

at the kiosk seller, if she, as mostly it was a middle-aged woman, was the same. In which case she yelled back that she knew shit about it and it was not her problem, the customer should've checked the product first before buying it and now could go to all four sides of the world, for what she cared.

Two women engaged in this type of *perepalka*, when Pavlik led Irka up into the street, rushing by annoying peasant scum trying to sell to them boiled corn, tickets to some concert, homemade mittens, socks, and everything else under the sun. There were the unfortunate ones who had to freeze outside trying to push their wares, without the privilege of staying in the heated bowels of Moscow metro.

Slinking by a long line of bundled up people waiting for the bus, Pavlik marched Irka by another couple blocks, until they made it to a quiet inner court occupied by a playground with broken swing being its prominent feature, dumpsters, and a lone dog walker in a fur hat pushed all the way down to his nose.

Pavlik pressed the combination of numbers on the panel next to the door. It beeped, and they entered.

An old *babushka* sat watching TV and knitting in the compartment to the right, closed off from all sides, with a window for her to look over who came and went.

"Zdravstvuyte. Hello." Said Pavlik politely. "We're to see Faina Ilinichna."

"Faina? Who would you be? Pavlik!" The woman's lined face alighted with recognition. "Come in, come in, she would be so happy to see you. Got her flowers and cake. Good boy. And who is this *krasavitsa*?" She ogled Irka's belly.

"This is Irina Marinova, my fiancée." Said Pavlik proudly.

"Oh, fiancée! So young! What joy, what joy. Let me look at your closer." The woman opened the door out of her enclosure and shuffled out, peering up at Irka and reaching out to feel her face.

Irka beamed. Yes, Pavlik was gay, but something purely inbred caused him to be automatically proud. He grew up in patriarchal culture that valued life traditions like getting married, producing children, getting a job, an apartment, a car, a *dacha*, typical summerhouse on the outskirts of Moscow. After that little things were considered, like the number of rugs in your place, the TV's, the tableware and the silverware. A woman was expected to serve on the man, a man was expected to bring money home. Curiously enough, in Soviet culture the woman was also expected to hold a job, yet raising children and feeding men fell chiefly on her shoulders, where as men spent their time watching TV, reading a newspaper, or getting drunk.

"Expecting?" Croaked the old hag, feeling Irka's belly.

"*Malchik? Devochka?*" She asked, putting an ear as if she could determine the gender of the baby. "Sharp. See? Jutting out. Sharp like a cone. It's boy, mark my words. I know."

Irka started to sweat. It was freezing cold outside, but sweltering hot inside.

"Excuse us. We must be going." Pavlik tugged on Irka's hand.

"Go, go. What joy, what a bundle of joy. Take care of it, you hear me? Take care of the baby, my beauties. Oy." She mopped away tears, shuffling back into her stronghold.

Instead of taking the elevator, Pavlik led Irka one flight of the stairs up.

Ilinichna lived in the second floor. The landing was closed behind yet another door. Newer construction buildings had this feature, for an additional layer of protection. Four bell buttons with handwritten numbers next to them were on the left of the door. Pavlik pushed one of them.

They could hear it buzz.

After a while, slow footsteps echoes across the landing. They heard breathing, and Ilinichna's inquisitive voice. "Who is it?" She tried sounding stern, but her voice cracked, weakened.

"It's Pavlik. Pavlik and Irina."

"Pavlik?" There was a tone of disbelief.

"We heard you had a stroke and a heart attack, so we came to visit." Pavlik spoke loudly into the door crack. "We brought you flowers and cake."

"Pavlik! Pavlik Boim. Curse my memory. It's not working well nowadays. What am I doing. Come in, come in." The latch clicked, and a second later Irka walked in after Pavlik into the landing, with four doors and piles of stuff next to each, old boxes of things, skis, a baby carriage, a vacuum. Ilinichna's door was last, surrounded by a mess of objects that have been sitting outside for so long, they lost their shape and function and belonged to the dumpster.

"Pavlik! Irina!" She couldn't believe they came, looking from one to another. Her face sunk, deep lines circled her eyes. Her whole frame shrunk and bent. The right side of her body appeared limp, or not functioning as well as Irka remembered.

"Didn't forget about me, my children." She mumbled something else, shaking her head, opening the door and beckoning the in a dingy apartment, semi-dark and damp, smelling like old cabbage soup. It was stuffed with things, with a passage being carved out between piles and piles of clothes and boxes everywhere, on shelves, on top of wardrobes, hanging from hooks on the walls, laying on the back of the couch, hanging on the backs of the chairs.

Irka gingerly put her coat on top of a pile of something smelling like old people. Ilinichna led them into a tiny kitchen adjacent to the tiny bathroom.

Here she filled a teakettle with water and lit fire under it, burning her fingers on the match and cursing under her breath.

"Sit, sit." She motioned them to the small table covered with a linoleum cloth sticky with grime.

Irka and Pavlik squeezed in, placing the cake and flowers on top. Ilinichna turned around, studying them. Her face lit up, and she clasped her hands.

"Are you the father?" She asked and produced a noise close to a laugh. Before Pavlik could answer, she rattled off a series of assumptions. "Why didn't you tell me before, you scoundrels? Didn't trust old Ilinichna with your secret? Stalin himself would've. I served for the party. My conscience is clear, God is the witness."

Irka found it amusing how two opposing beliefs coexisted in Ilinichna's universe, her constant assertions of God and her faithful belief in the power of communist party and Stalin regime.

"Thought I guessed, I guessed alright. That's why you came to the theater. Almost fooled me. Nobody fools old Ilinichna, nobody. Wish my Allochka was here, to see you. She would've been

so happy for both of you, so happy. Too bad about Kostik, such a young promise, such talent." She launched into a spiel about her daughter, the angel, and how if not for the moron Sasha, she would still be alive. About how the president was a moron as well as an idiot, how the government was rotten and deserved to be burned in incinerators alive, and on and on it went.

Having heard this numerous times before, Irka and Pavlik politely nodded, consumed a slice of cake each, and then hastily made their way out, promising Ilinichna to come again and show her the baby. She did tell them that she planned to be back to work, just had to fix her health a little.

By the time they made it back to the metro, it got dark, and Irka felt exhausted, wanting only to drop to bed and fall asleep.

"We planted the seed." Said Pavlik conspiratorially. "Ilinichna is the theater's source of information. You watch. She'll call tonight everyone she knows. We're golden." Pavlik smiled, content with his plans coming to fruition.

Irka sagged a bit. It was all part of the plan for him, she was part of the plan. She sighed. She was doing it for the baby, it was worth it. Besides, she liked walking next to Pavlik, holding on to his arm, as if he was truly in love with her. It was close enough to reality for her to be content with.

Chapter 27. The Letter

They filed into *pod'ezd*, both tired and cold. With unbending fingers, Pavlik opened the mailbox and took out a pack of letters and a newspaper. He flipped through them while they waited for the elevator, and Irka wouldn't have noticed a thing if not for a sudden silence. He stopped breathing. She looked up. Pavlik held a piece of paper, visibly shaking. Without hesitation, Irka snatched it out of his hand. Some feral instinct suggested to her that if she didn't, he'd never let her read it.

"Don't." He said. "Give it back!"

Irka twisted out of his way. The note was written on a lined piece of paper, each word spelled with large childish letters in an attempt to disguise the handwriting.

VONYUCHIY BLYADUN. STINKING FAGGOT. YOUR DEATH IS COMING. WE WILL KILL YOU. THIS is A WARNING FOR YOU AND YOUR WHORE. YOU HAVE 48 HOURS TO FULFILL OUR DEMAND. YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

Irka's insides froze. She immediately thought about Roma and his gang leaving the other day. She reached into her backpack and took out a copy of the script, pointing at what she wrote earlier.

They know where you live. Then she added. *I've seen them.*

"You've seen who? This is nonsense." Pavlik exploded.

"Somebody put this by mistake."

Irka insisted, tapping the script.

"Who are they? What are you talking about?" He raised his voice. "How can you possibly—"

"Pavlusha?" Yulia's voice called from above. "Pavlusha, is that you?" Without waiting for an answer, slippers flip-flopped down the stairs.

"I'm sorry. Sorry for yelling. I didn't mean to, please, forgive me. Please, give this to me, don't let mama see it." Pavlik pleaded with Irka.

Something held her back.

The elevator arrived just as the apartment door to their right opened and a woman with a head full of hair curlers and a mouth twisted in contempt, pushed out a man and slammed the door behind him. Irka recognized the same drunk she stumbled upon the first time she came to visit Pavlik.

"*Rebyata!*" He announced, slurring, and fell on them, half-hugging, half-hanging. "Help me, *rebyata*. Help me. Need a drink. Throat is dry, so dry." He reeked of vodka.

In the humdrum of this, neither Irka nor Pavlik noticed how Yulia stealthily made it to the first floor and snatched the note from Irka's unresisting hand, reading it.

"Mama, no." Began Pavlik.

"What is this..." Said Yulia quietly, an empty trash bucket in her other hand. She must have come down to third floor to dump it. The receptacle between fourth and fifth floor was jammed.

"*Damochka*. Give an old man for a drink. I just need one drink. Just one, I swear." The man stepped on his own foot and fell into Yulia's arms.

"Don't touch me, swine!" She yelled in his face and pushed him off. He went sprawling on the landing, grumbling and attempting to pull himself up. Another door, opposite the first one, creaked open. A little girl's face peeked out. From behind her a fat woman came up, scolded her, and shut the door, locking it.

Yulia clutched at her heart. "Where did you find this, Pavlusha?" She managed.

"Yulechka?" Anton called from above. "Yulechka, are you all right? I'm coming."

Typical, thought Irka. Once there was a commotion in *pod'yezd*, starving for local news or entertainment, or because they were plain bored, neighbors started crawling out of every hole like fucking cockroaches, to see what deal was.

The drunk began singing something about World War II, picking up in volume. He stood on all fours, careened and fell again.

"Shut your fucking mouth, you worthless dick!" The drunkard's wife yelled from the doorway. She must have decided to check on her darling. "You'll wake up the whole *pod'yezd!* Honest people are going to work tomorrow, you moron! They're trying to sleep! If you won't shut up, I'm calling militia!" "Please excuse him. He's my husband, drunk through our grocery money again. Have to teach him a lesson. Feel free to give him a good kick, if you wish, you'll only help me." She said to Boims.

"No worries. We're not bothered." Answered Yulia with a strained smile.

"I hope you rot to death." The woman, done with the conversation, glanced at her husband, spat on the floor, and slammed the door shut.

"*Blyad!*" Shouted the man. "Are you going to leave me to freeze here?"

Anton, who by now made it to the scene, took his wife by one arm, his son by the other and pressed the elevator button again. It creaked open. He pushed them in. Irka followed. Raspy doors shut and the machine began its laborious accent, counting off each floor with a jerk or a shift, making Irka's heart jump from freight. She was afraid of the elevators, having gotten

stuck once for hours, waiting for the technician to show up and get her out, which he did, smelling of hangover and cracking saucy jokes, eating her up with his eyes. Thankfully, Irka made it out before he could go any further.

They rode in silence. Yulia's hand trembled, clutching the note. Pavlik glared at Irka, Irka looked at her feet.

"Nice coat, Irina." Commented Anton as they filed out. "Is this new?"

"When are we getting out of this hole? I'm sick of it." Hissed Yulia, as Anton unlocked many locks of their metal door.

"Yulechka, I'm doing everything I can. You know that."

Once inside, Yulia felt in her domain. She shoved the note into Anton's hands.

"Hmm?" He said, peering through glasses. "What is this?"

"That's what I would like to know." She passed air through tightened lips, looking at Pavlik.

"Mama, it must be a horrible mistake of some sort. It was in our mail. Somebody must've put it inside by mistake." Said Pavlik, trying to control his voice so that it sounded steady. "Let me—"

"A death threat?" Asked Anton with a surprise on his face. "For one of us? But who would—why? Pavlusha, where did you find this again? I don't think they put it in the right mailbox. You see, Yulechka, it's meant for a... how to put it, for someone of a

homosexual orientation." Anton's blindness to his son's private life was his own choice. *People see things they like to see*, thought Irka, *never noticing the proverbial elephant in the room*. Not so much Yulia. As a mother, she read Pavlik's signs more intuitively, but still refused to believe that her beloved baby turned out gay, deeming it weak, wrong and disgusting.

Pavlik's face has gone ashen. Both him and Irka knew it was meant for him, although the note didn't state his name. Pavlik has gone into staring, as if doing nothing and pretending like whatever happened had zero to do with him would be much help.

Irka had to act. But how? What would she tell them?

She boldly walked up to Anton, tapped the note and pressed a finger to her chest.

"You?" Asked Anton, a sour expression stealing over his face. "Does this have anything to do with you?"

Irka nodded, quickly thinking. And then it hit her. Perfect. She could use it as an excuse and justify everything, perhaps convincing Pavlik's parents' of their son's innocence in regards to his sexual endeavors for good. She'd compromise their image of her, but that was going to happen anyway. Yulia was bent to meet her parents prior to organizing the wedding, thinking Irka's parents were well off. All her assumptions, of course, were based on Irka's stolen *shuba*. Irka smirked, thinking again, *yes, people see what they want to see*. Yulia

couldn't phantom her son would fall for anyone but a girl from a respectable well-to-do family.

Irka got ready to shatter Boim's assumptions. She took off her coat and hung it neatly.

"Where is your *shuba*?" Called Yulia, just noticing the change.

"Sim—" Began Pavlik and bit his tongue.

"Sim what, Pavlusha?" Demanded Yulia with a sly smile.

"Sim is giving Irina a role in The Raven. He said she needs to blend into character. You know him. Every single detail is important."

"Oh." Said Yulia, deflated and elated at the same time.

"Oh, that's good news. A role. What kind of a role?"

Anton said nothing.

Irka pretended she didn't hear their conversation, walked into the kitchen, smoothed the script and wrote: *I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away. I was afraid. My mom's boyfriend is following me—* She paused, unable to come up with a good lie on the fly, whilst the Boim family breathed into her back, watching her write. *—I stole mom's wedding ring. He's seen me with Pavlik. He disapproves of early marriages. Whoever he hates he calls gay, it's the lowest of the low, in his opinion. He demands I give back the ring. It's nothing bad, trust me, this is just to scare me, to get me home.*

Irka massaged her hand, unaccustomed to writing so much in one go.

An ominous silence spread behind her.

"Can I see?" Said Anton quietly.

Irka let him hold her hand. "I'll be damned." Said Anton. "If it isn't..." He trailed off. "I think this is my work, very well could be. Maybe not. Maybe Yasha's. The bastard. He stole a few of my designs back in the day. How old is this? About twenty years?"

"Have you not told your mother where you are?" Asked Yulia. "I presumed you have by now."

"Irina... wanted to make it a surprise." Interjected Pavlik. "Please forgive us, mama, for keeping you in the dark." He threw a glance of gratitude at Irka. She barely lifted an eyebrow to signify acceptance. They agreed on helping each other, didn't they, and that's exactly what she did.

"I don't understand. Are you saying you have no father?"

"Mama, can we talk about this later?" Pleaded Pavlik. "We're tired, Irina is tired, she needs to sleep. We have to be in the theater by nine tomorrow. Besides—"

"Do you mind?" Said Anton, enthralled by his discovery.

Irka reluctantly let him slide the ring off her finger, watching it like a hawk. She was wary of people taking her things, never owning anything of value on her own. Yes, the ring

was stolen, but it belonged to her mother, and it was precious to her, the only memory she had of her mother's and father's union, a hypothetical wedding that took place in her mind as Marina had nothing left of it, not a single photograph, leaving it to Irka's imagination.

Anton disappeared into his study.

"You lied to us." Stated Yulia quietly.

Irka shook like a leaf, looking at Pavlik. She preferred Yulia yell. This controlled behavior scared her, she didn't know what to expect.

"Mama, please."

"No, help me understand." She paused. "Anton? I need you here."

"Yulechka, I'm a little busy at the moment." Came from the study.

"Well, get unbusy, this is important. This concern's your son's future, our future. Our... future plans." She peered at Irka. "What kind of a man would send a death threat to his step-daughter to make her come home? Certainly, not a very educated one. May I ask what your mother's... boyfriend—" she said it with distaste, "does for a living?"

He's an alcoholic who got recently discharged from prison for theft, whiling his days away by watching TV and drinking

vodka. Irka wanted to write. Instead, she wrote. He is looking for work.

"Ah, this explains things. Nice choice, Pavlusha." Yulia glared at her son.

"Mama." Retorted Pavlik. "When you married papa, he couldn't find a job because of his... you know. He was unemployed for years before he got into jewelry. How is this any different? What do you know about this man's history?"

He kept throwing accusations at his mother, polite, but accusations nonetheless, while Irka thought with bitterness that Lyosha didn't deserve any of it. He deserved to be put back to prison and rot there till the end of his days, but she couldn't possibly tell Pavlik that he was an ex-prison convict, worse, she couldn't tell him that he was the father of her baby.

"Silence!"

Irka jumped.

Anton stood between his son and his wife, turning his head from one to the other. "Enough bickering. I have a headache from you two. Can't you talk like civilized people?" As fast as he got angry, Anton deflated at the sign of Yulia's tears.

"Antosha, don't yell at me." She sobbed, looking at him deplorably.

"Forgive me, Yulechka. Forgive me."

Irka looked at Pavlik, who returned a shrug. Whatever mysterious relationship his parents engaged in, he shared Irka's opinion on it being ridiculous. Quietly, while Anton was busy calming down his wife, Pavlik and Irka disappeared into the bedroom and fell on the covers, exhausted.

"Thank you." Said Pavlik under his breath.

Irka was too tired to answer, drifting into uneasy sleep.

Chapter 28. The American

On their way to the theater they barely spoke. Irka was deep into her thoughts, Pavlik deep into his. They have tangled themselves into a net of lies, from which neither of them saw an exit except to produce more lies. Pavlik was determined not to admit that the death threat was meant for him, nor discuss what exactly these people wanted. Irka was determined not to disclose Lyosha's true intentions, nervous about Anton holding back her ring, claiming he needed to examine it in his jewelry lab to determine if, in fact, it was his or Yasha's. Yulia refused to talk to either of them in the morning and so they departed, sullen.

"Our station." Pavlik said, motioning.

They made their way out of the metro and trotted along snowy streets, some of the shops decorated with lights, a new feature of Moscow becoming more westernized after the dissolution of Soviet Union, getting ready for the New Year's celebration. Russians didn't have Christmas in December like most of Europe or United States. Tsar Peter the Great attempted to shift Russia to Gregorian calendar on the eve of the seventeenth century, but after his death it was reversed back,

to be accepted again by Soviet Government in 1918. All religious holidays were still celebrated according to Julian calendar, two weeks later, which Irka didn't fully understand since she heard about this in history class. By her observations, it was used as an excuse to get drunk twice, for a week in December condemning decaying capitalists to hell, and for a week in January. Lyosha had a tear-off calendar on which he managed to find a reason to drink every day, either for the invention of the Kalashnikov's rifle or some other bullshit achievement that proved important enough to commemorate.

Irka had a bad feeling about Lyosha, remembering their accidental interaction. Was he able to find out where Kostik worked? Did he find the theater? Was he waiting for her there, to snatch her and get her home? What would he say if he saw her belly? Last time he was so drunk, he didn't notice. Last time, there was hardly *anything* to notice. Not now. Irka neared middle of her pregnancy and her midriff started to expand, prompting her to eat like a pig.

Torn out of her thoughts, she found herself hanging the coat in the dressing room and filing out after Pavlik to the stage, where the ensemble of actors waited anxiously for Sim's arrival, for the first rehearsal of his new play, *The Raven*. Irka and Pavlik joined everyone wordlessly from behind, Pavlik issuing a few subdued greetings and receiving mandatory shoulder

slaps for becoming a father, as well as invitations to mark the occasion, which meant alcohol. Pavlik shook his head. Since Kostik's death he stopped going to parties.

"How are we this glorious morning, my sweet boys and girls? Marvelous, marvelous!" Boomed Sim's voice. He strolled from the gloom of the auditorium. He was not alone. A lad with a mop of blond hair sauntered behind him, his tanned face split in a blinding smile. "Please. Welcome John Kowalski from New York! Fresh from Broadway! He has graciously agreed to join out production!" John smiled even wider, if that was possible, and waved gallantly. "Hello, beautiful people! How are you?"

Irka felt Pavlik breathe faster. John was older than Kostik, but he did resemble him somewhat. His hair was shorter, his stance was not as proud, and he looked a typical American boy from the very little Irka saw of American actors in the movies that she glimpsed on TV, but he was pretty in the full sense of the word, pretty like a girl. She briefly wondered if Sim has slept with him already or if he was planning to.

Pavlik took an involuntary step forward, in time to see Sim slam John's buttocks playfully, chasing him onstage. Actors engaged in greeting him in broken English, some with excitement, others with jealousy, yet others with barely covered hate. A couple, clearly gay, as Irka saw now, studied him with an open

interest that suggested they'd like to try and see what kind of beast this boy was and he was to their tastes.

Irka helplessly watched Pavlik detach from her and mingle in with the shine, coming closer to John, looking up in his face like a puppy, smitten. John smiled broadly, kissing everyone lavishly and scooping people for a group hug, to ashamed giggles, throwing around phrases like "fucking awesome" and "fucking love it" and "will be fucking great" and such, which Irka didn't understand but thought they all must have meant something good, judging by people's reactions. She decided to ask Sim later what "fucking" meant, since John repeated it so often. It was a rare sight, an American who was not an elderly tourist or a groomed middle-aged businessman, one of the few who dared to conduct business in Russia at the time.

Sim joined the circle of actors, and they all danced around, kicking out legs, beckoning Irka in. She shook her head, pointing to her belly. John detached from the group, walked over and scooped her into a hug. "Hi! How are you, love?" He gave her a big smooch.

"No talk, no talk." Said Sim, flushing.

"She doesn't talk." Picked up Pavlik in an almost perfect English, to the hooting of the crowd.

"Why, my apologies. I didn't fucking know. My name is John. John Kowalski. My grandfather was Russian." He shook Irka's

hand. She stared, not at his prettiness, but at his teeth. They were flawless and dazzlingly white. Irka has not in her life seen teeth like that, they looked plastic. Everything about him was unreal. The hair, the unblemished skin, the clothes. He was like a doll, and Irka, as much as she tried, couldn't avert her eyes. *If gay Americans look like this*, she thought, *I wonder how straight Americans look?* She shut the thought deep into the back of her mind, before starting to imagine what it would be like to go to a different country, to America, painfully understanding Pavlik's desire to escape. It sounded like a fantasy world filled with nice beautiful people. It simply couldn't be true.

The rest of the day she spent onstage, watching Sim do his magic, shouting, directing people, causing them to laugh and cry, and asking her a couple times to cross the stage and sit on a chair in the corner, while Pavlik fell to his knees and delivered a monologue, then a couple men picked her up, chair and everything, and carried her to the other side of the stage, for John to wrap her in gauze and repeat after Sim in bad Russian something that didn't make any sense to Irka. She thought, *this is art, it's not meant to be understood, it's meant to be absorbed*, as Sim repeatedly shouted, so she tried absorbing it, with little success. She was tired, she was hungry, and she was sweaty from all this wrapping and

unwrapping. At the next break she slunk away, hoping to quickly refresh herself in the bathroom.

She locked the door, pulled off her sweater, lashed water on her breasts, grabbed a handful of toilet paper, stuck it under the faucet and wiped under her arms. She splashed her face, and dressed, feeling better. Now she could withstand the second half of the day and the mandatory restaurant outing with the whole troupe to celebrate the first rehearsal.

Irka just exited the bathroom when a sinewy hand snatched her by the arm from behind.

Surprised, she gasped.

Konkin pressed her into the wall, as much as her belly permitted, leaning over, a stale beer breath dousing her.

"Your papa is looking for you." He sneered, and snatched the right side of her ass.

Irka stiffened. He had quite the nerve to corner her here. Merry voices trailed from above. At any moment one of the actors could've walked downstairs for a pee break. Of course, as was Irka's luck, nobody did. Nobody missed her, not even Pavlik.

"He said you need to get home, *dura*. He said, if you won't get home by the end of the week, he trusts me to deliver you home, in any shape or form I desire." He giggled unpleasantly.

Irka began boiling inside. She swore to protect her baby, and here she was, being assaulted by Konkin, again, paralyzed

out of her mind, not being able to speak, or scream, or move. She felt her face turn hot. Lyosha found her after all. On some level she knew it.

"I don't believe for a second that maggot knocked you up." Konkin whispered in her ear. "That stinking batty boy can't get his cock up unless another tears up his ass, you hear me? You think I don't know?" He squeezed her buttock painfully, grunting and rubbing against it. "Sim won't help you, *dura*, just so you know. All right? Just so we're clear. Fat faggot himself, he is. Banging every fucking arse in sight. I'll get to him, trust me, I will. I'll strangle him with one of his stupid scarves, so he knows better how to dress like a man. I'll rip out his balls and stuff them in his mouth, you'll see. I'll—"

Irka was done listening. Her anger boiled over, and some ancient force, perhaps one that causes mothers to overturn boulders that weigh more than a ton to free their trapped offspring, moved Irka's hands on its own accord. She reached and grabbed Konkin's works, everything she could fit in her hand, then closed her fingers and twisted, twisted hard, so that Konkin first stopped talking, then gagged, then whimpered like a little boy, tears sprouting from his eyes.

He doubled down, but Irka wouldn't let go, twisting harder. She drank in his pain, and it scared her. She enjoyed it.

Terrified, she released her hold, just as Sim floated downstairs.

"Vladimir, sugar cock, what are you doing, delaying my actress? I gave no permission." He said loudly. "She needs to be onstage. I demand you stop your practice of interfering with my actors while they're in the middle of rehearsing, unless you want me complain to higher-ups. Go, go!" He shooed Irka away, but not before she witnessed Konkin spit at Sim, calling him dead meat and staggering off, swearing on his mother and everything under the sun that he will extinguish this filth, this homosexual virus that polluted our nation, to purify Russia, to which Sim replied that he could kiss his job goodbye.

The rest Irka didn't hear, blending in with the actors, avoiding Pavlik's questioning eyes.

Lyosha found me. She wrote in the back of her old diary as soon as they had a quiet moment, sitting in Sim's car on their way home after a long day and with no restaurant outing as planned. Sim was in a thunderous mood after he came upstairs, yelling at everyone, stomping, swearing more than usual, and then falling quiet, sending actors home, citing a massive headache as the reason.

Who is Lyosha? Wrote Pavlik, giving Irka back the pen.

My mom's boyfriend.

The one you said sent you the death note? Pavlik studied Irka. *I apologize for not thanking you properly. You saved me there. Thank you. I'm forever in your debt.*

She shrugged. *No problem.* Pen hovered over paper. Irka couldn't make herself say anything else.

Pavlik took it out of her fingers. *Did you mean it? Does he want to harm you?*

Yes. Wrote Irka, looking away.

Why?

He swore he'd kill me if I ever ran away.

Kill you? Why? Pavlik looked at her incredulously. Despite the fact that he received another death threat just yesterday and tore it into pieces, he couldn't possibly fathom his father threatening him with anything except denying him pocket money. Unlike Irka, he grew up a relatively spoiled highly educated pampered boy, smartest in class, and cutest, as it turned out. He told Irka that Sim visited their school and selected ten boys for his experimental theater group, all of them thirteen. That's how Pavlik got introduced to theater. When Irka asked him if Sim screwed any of them, Pavlik looked down. That was answer enough for her. Since that moment Irka was dying to share her pain with her only close friend. She couldn't quite find the courage and only disclosed that one of her mom's exes, Gosha Zemchin, introduced her to theater and that's how she fell in love with

it. Pavlik said he remembered the name of Zemchin but that has never seen him.

He stared at Irka, waiting for an answer.

Because... She wrote and paused.

Because what? Pavlik insisted.

Can't tell you. Irka buried her face in her hands.

"Personal home delivery. Take your juicy asses out of my car, please. My head is splitting in two. Must go home and nurse it." Said Sim. "See you kids tomorrow at nine, sharp. And we need to talk." He looked at Irka with the face of one who means business.

That night Irka promised Pavlik she would tell him her secret, if he told her his, after which they both plunged into quiet thinking, about life, love, and the meaning of it all.

Chapter 29. The New Year

Nothing significant happened in the several days leading up to the New Year. Irka kept having a bad premonition that it's quietest right before the storm, but on the surface everything looked as good as ever. Sim avoided her despite his intent to talk. Konkin stopped bothering her. She rehearsed with Pavlik every day, enjoyed Yulia's and Anton's softened attitude, and on New Year's went to visit Pavlik's grandmother, Margarita Boim, a fashionable old matron who waited for them at the door, in a sixties style dress and with tasteful makeup on wrinkly face, acting as if she was thirty, moving about with ancient grace. Throughout the week leading up to their visit, it was decided that Margarita would move in with Yulia and Anton, and Pavlik and Irka would move to her apartment, to start their own little family.

"Good day to you, dear." Were the first words out of her mouth. Irka thought she must've belonged to the old Moscow aristocracy, such were her manners and stature. "Turns out, you look lovely." She said with a smile, and turned to Pavlik. "That's my grandson. Good job, Pavlusha. Lovely bum. Something a good man likes to hold on to."

Pavlik turned red.

"Mama, *davay*. Let's get inside. No good standing here."

Said Yulia nervously, smoothing over the awkwardness.

Irka couldn't read Margarita, it's as if she wore a mask of practiced habit that became so ingrained that her true emotions ceased to exist. "Your baby will be beautiful, with genes like these." She was the first old hag in months who didn't reach out and start tousling Irka's cheeks, or belly, or both, and for that she instantly loved her. "I feel you. Must be great shock caused you to stop talking." She professed with knowledge, leading them into her only room, small yet clean, the table set in the middle, a thin spruce New Year tree decked out in the corner with shiny ornaments and silver tinsel.

"Mama, you didn't have to!" Exclaimed Yulia. "I asked you not to. Think about your health, at your age." She pursed her lips, depositing purchases on the table one by one, bottles of champagne, mandarins, home made salads in glass jars.

"Yulechka, stop it. I'm fine. I said I'll cook. What's this? Why did you bring all this? You think I can't afford to feed you on my own?" Margarita was shorter than her daughter, but she towered over her as she said it, and Yulia didn't reply, defeated. "I'm not dead yet, thank goodness. You don't have to fuss around me like I'm a little baby. Fuss around your future daughter-in-law, that's your job now."

"Mama, how can you." Was the only thing Yulia said, before falling quiet. Margarita's domination of the atmosphere was complete. She served food, chatted up Anton about his jewelry business, Pavlik about his theater. She scurried off and brought a notepad and an old-fashioned ink pen for Irka, asking her questions about her family and her recent acting role.

The TV flickered blue in the background. Midnight was not too far off, and with it Yeltsin's presidential address and *Goluboy Ogonek*, The Little Blue Light, traditional musical program that featured pop artists, proud cosmonauts and grim heroes of social labor, all in one pot, to viewing pleasure of every Russian citizen. There was, after all, only one entertainment program for them to watch after the bells of Red Square chimed their twelve melodic dings.

Distracted by TV, Irka wrote as little as she could, growing warm towards Margarita despite herself. She showed class. She treated her like an equal, with respect. If Irka's pen hovered for too long, she told her it was okay to stay silent, it was her right, it was her private information, and she was only curious because she was happy for her grandson and of course would've liked to find out more about the girl who drove him mad enough to become a father at eighteen.

At these words Pavlik blushed, from shame, Irka knew, but Margarita took it as genuine show of feelings and clapped,

puckering her lips. She intently listened to Yulia' account of the death threat Irka received from her mother's boyfriend and suggested that there must be a reason for everything, siding with Anton much to Yulia's annoyance. She urged them to visit Irka's home no matter what, and for the rest of the visit Irka sat paralyzed, with her feet cold and her heart jittering, picturing what they would say of the dirt, the two dogs, three cats, a hedgehog and a rat, and a slew of women who liked parading around the apartment naked, when no men were present.

"Like it here?" Margarita asked Irka.

Irka jerked from surprise and nodded. Of course she liked it, it was neat, it smelled faintly of outmoded cologne, with none of that revolting old people smell, and it had a nice view from a tiny balcony, to the patch of birches and a playground that hasn't been broken yet, at least it looked whole under the streetlights. That signified a nice neighborhood, albeit a bit far from the nearest metro station.

"It'll be good for the baby, for you to live here. We have many young mothers here, I see them walking all the time." Added Margarita helpfully.

"Mama, you sure you can handle the move?" Asked Anton with concern. He addressed her as mama out of habit. She was, in fact, like a mother to him, especially since both of his parents

were dead. Irka suspected it was not a good death. Anton never talked about it.

"Of course I can handle it. I'm still young." Said Margarita, fixing her hair.

"Mama, I really don't like this idea." Said Yulia. "This is not why we got—"

"Oh, nonsense." Interrupted Margarita. "Don't worry about me, worry about new blood. I hope to live to see another Boim born into this world." She blinked rapidly. "Know who it is? Boy or girl?"

"We're going to a doctor soon. They'll do an ultrasound. They'll tell us." Said Yulia, glancing Irka up and down.

Irka stiffened even more. She imagined the horror of being subjected to all kinds of tests, from which it would be obvious that Pavlik wasn't the father of her baby at all.

"I'd love to come. When are you going? Is it at our old polyclinic?" Asked Pavlik, taking Irka's hand.

She threw him a look of gratitude, grasping his fingers for dear life. Yes, Pavlik was gay, yes, he loved her only like a sister, but he felt her like nobody else.

"That's no business for men." Frowned his grandmother. "Leave it to women, boy. You already did your part." She giggled again, wrinkled hand to her mouth.

"Mama!" Said Yulia sternly.

"Don't you mama me. I'll talk how I want to talk. At this age I don't give a damn anymore. Like he doesn't know how babies are made? Look at her. Think she ballooned from drinking too much water?"

Yulia said noting. Red crept up her cheeks.

"Ladies, I love you both. Please, an hour left to midnight. Let us enjoy the food." Interjected Anton.

They all got busy loading their plates.

Talk turned to small talk about trivial things, Margarita's pills, broken pipes, Anton's recent hires, Yulia's trip to flea market for rare art. Pavlik hardly participated, occasionally throwing in a detail about his theater life, glancing at Irka.

Irka chewed mechanically, thinking that she had to protect her secret at all costs. These people around her, no matter how bossy they appeared, they cared. They fed her, they gave her a place to live, they were planning on setting her life with a flat, their own flat, for what? For nothing. All she had to do was to deliver a baby, a healthy baby that hopefully looked very much like her, to delude them into thinking that their son was responsible for it. They were her ticket to life, to proper life with proper things in it, a husband, a car, a home, a job, and money. She could finally have money. She'd never drink, she swore to herself. She'd save, for the black day, because black days always came when you least expected them, but this time

she'd be prepared. Pavlik was bound to leave her, she knew, either for a different man or for a different country. Until then she'd take what she could.

So far Irka's only income was her pay for the month she cleaned the theater under Konkin's supervision. The only thing of value she possessed was taken by Anton. Sim promised to pay her after the premiere, but how much, she didn't know. There was no help to be expected from her mother. That left stealing things, which was increasingly hard to do because she was busy with rehearsals and too heavy to waddle out of the stores fast enough to feel out of reach. In other words, she didn't dare.

"Here it comes. Fifteen seconds!" Proclaimed Anton, standing up with a glass of champagne. They all stood, counting off. Ten. Nine. Eight.

The giant clock on the Spasskaya tower, the Kremlin chimes, ding-donged on the TV screen. Three. Two. One.

"Happy New Year!" They clinked glasses and drank. They drank to the new 1994th year, to Irka's health, to everyone's health and prosperity, to the new baby, to the marriage, to Pavlik and his career, and to many other things.

The puffy face of the president appeared on the screen. They all stood, watching him, then Anton sat down, shaking his head. "I can't stand this moron. At least Gorbachev could spell.

Listen to this imbecile. Is he perpetually drunk? Shame. Shame on this country." He covered his face.

"Shh! Antosha, don't talk like this." Warned him Yulia.

"Why not?" Snapped Margarita. "What's he going to do about it, I'd like to know." She brandished a gnarly finger at the screen.

"Mama." Yulia didn't act herself, subdued.

"Don't want to hear any more of this. They won't shut up on TV, neighbors yammer off my ears, and now you're jumping the same horse. Enough! We have a pregnant girl here. We're making her nervous with our squabble. Are we making you nervous?" Margarita looked at Irka.

"Irina is fine. She's tough. That's why I love her." Said Pavlik, light playing in his eyes.

Irka's heart somersaulted.

"Lovely. Lovely thing to say. *Gorko*. Bitter." Said Margarita. Bitter, although Irka couldn't understand why it was supposed to be bitter, was a traditional call at Russian weddings for the couple to kiss. One guest shouted it, others picked up, chanting, and the newly minted bride and groom obliged for as many times as the crowd deemed satisfactory.

"Now?" Pavlik's mouth opened.

"I said, bitter. I want to see you kiss." Margarita sat down with a satisfied smile. "Maybe I'll live to your wedding,

maybe I won't. Terrible thing to be old. Death taps on your shoulder every day. Terrible, terrible. I want to see young love. Go on, humor your grandmother."

Irka and Pavlik were put on the spot. So far they have avoided public display of intimacy, but they were backed in the corner. Pavlik's acting skills saved them. He swiftly stood, scooped Irka, bent her over his arm and hovered over, his back to the table, brushing her lips with his, thus creating an illusion of a passionate kiss to those seated behind him.

"I can't see!" Shouted Margarita.

Pavlik added smooching sounds. They straightened after another minute of this.

"I'm sorry you couldn't see, grandma. My apologies. We, um, we got carried away a little." He acted a convincing awkwardness, and Margarita, beyond herself, clapped her hands.

"This was how it was done in my days." She boasted. "Gallant, simply gallant. That's my boy. Makes me proud." She squeezed around the table and kissed both Pavlik and Irka on a cheek, congratulating them, then did the same to Yulia and Anton, who, relaxed from consumption of alcohol, hugged each other, something Irka hasn't seen them do once. And just then, when it was all warm and homey and comfortable, mother Russia reminded them of the country they lived in, the glum desolate place where you couldn't lose guard for a single minute, lest

you got eaten up by those who never lost it, not for a second, those who made survival their job. It was called natural selection, and it transpired in full swing ever since Soviet Union fell apart, the only difference being, it wasn't hidden by fake propaganda or censored by TV and newspapers anymore. Freedom entered the country, and with it, dissolution of values. There were no more pride, justice, or equality, none of this fake rubbish. Mob ruled, and mob won. You were either part of it, or you were crushed by it. If you remained alive after, you were crushed by vodka, hunger, homelessness, or all of the above, helped by with neglect of the state.

A piercing scream jarred them, then another, and another. Someone, a woman by the sound of it, screamed non-stop. It was horrible, like a scream of the one who was mortally wounded.

Chapter 30. The Murder

For a minute everyone sat silent, paralyzed, trying to decide what to do. Act? Not act? Go see? Remain seated? Fear was deeply instilled in Russians from birth, in contrast to state banners calling all workers always looking out for each other. All of this crumbled now, losing its significance, but it wasn't easy to root it out of people's minds. History liked to repeat itself. Nobody was safe. So thought the old, not so much the young. First on his feet was Pavlik. Irka followed him.

"Pavlusha! Where are you going? Leave it!" Said the ever-cautious Yulia, but he was out of the door already.

Irka grabbed onto his arm, tiptoeing behind.

She could feel Anton's breath on her back, the quiet whispers to his wife and Margarita, who both stopped to pick up shawls, draping them over their shoulders. It was biting cold on the landing, in contrast to hot apartment where they sat a minute ago, snugly and warm.

A bony woman with a crazed face and rolling eyes, her coat askew, stood in the doorway opposite theirs, tearing out her hair and screaming. She would run out of air, gulp more, and scream again. Gulp, scream, gulp, scream.

"What's the racket?" An angry voice shouted behind them.
 "I'm trying to sleep. Svetka, are you out of your mind? Shut your trap." An older man, bent and balding, cautiously peered through a crack in his door. There were footsteps from above, voices.

Svetka kept screaming. It's like she couldn't stop.

"Excuse me. What happened? Anything we can help with?"
 Asked Pavlik politely.

The woman stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Pavlusha, let's call medics. They'll know what to do."
 Suggested Anton.

"You know long it will take them to get here on New Year's, papa? You're joking, right? They're all drunk out of their minds." Said Pavlik bitterly.

"Papa speaks truth, Pavlusha. Nothing you can do. She's obviously in distress." Added Yulia. "Or drunk out of her mind."
 She added under her breath. "Besides, it's none of our business."

Pavlik ogled his mother with contempt.

Irka followed his gaze. She thought that Yulia neatly summarized the belief Russians lived by. When drunk, Marina Marinova, Irka's mother, always told her, *that world out there, don't care if goes up in flames. I care for my door, my home behind it. The only place I can call mine, only, damn, can't*

deck it out in the latest and greatest, like them leeches with money. Well, fuck them. Let them die, for all I care. It's none of my business. Irka gulped, reminiscing. Her mother was the direct product of the so-called ideology bred by communism, where people were supposed to be equal, only it backfired. In case of Marina, it turned to hate. In case of Irka herself, it turned to indifference and aloofness she displayed all throughout her school days.

The woman hiccupped now.

A thin crowd started forming on the stairs, people talking between themselves, muttering suggestions, hastily belting their housecoats, or, in the case of one young kid, drinking beer and belching loudly.

Svetka suddenly snatched Pavlik's hand and pulled him inside, holding him so tight, Irka saw his skin go white. She trotted after, with the intent of making the woman stop, but soon forgot all about her intent, about everything, in fact. Irka had not seen a single horror movie in her life. Things like that weren't broadcast on Russian television. Her poor mother didn't own a VHS player, and Irka had no friends to go to, to watch movies from overseas. She had little need for that, her own life was filled with enough horror. But what she saw that night beat all horror movies ever made. This was the horror of death delivered firsthand.

The walls of the apartment were covered with smeared blood, stripes of it across flowery wallpaper, as if someone, injured, stumbled along.

The woman tugged on Pavlik, sobbing, yammering on and on. "They killed him! They killed him, the bastards! Killed him! They killed him!"

"Who? Killed who?" Asked Pavlik, walking on unbending legs. He followed Svetka into the living room and stopped abruptly. Tearing his arm out of her hold, he swiftly turned around and blocked Irka. "Don't go there." He whispered. His face lost color. His pupils widened. He forgot that Irka was much shorter than him. Unable to hold her morbid curiosity, she peeked under his arm.

The room looked poor and shabby. No rugs on the wall or on the floor, a rickety table with a few celebratory dishes and empty bottles of vodka in the corner, but that was not what caught her attention. By the door to the balcony stood the typical spruce New Year tree, decorated with the same silver tinsel, as it was in every Russian home. Underneath it, where in Europe or America people placed presents for their children, lay a crumpled figure of a man. By his strangely bent body it was clear he was dead. He bled from every possible place you could discern, wearing only pants and no shirt. It looked like he was chased across the entire apartment, stabbed multiple times with

a knife that lay next to him in the pool of dark liquid, growing larger by the second.

If Irka could scream, she would. But she only gagged noiselessly, feeling her tongue expand and grow.

She recognized him. It was Roma, the guy who raped her with his gang. His eyes were bright blue and vacant, staring into nothing, dead. His mouth was half-open.

Irka lost her sense of hearing, smelling, of everything, except seeing. She could hardly feel her body, the only thing she registered in front of her was Roma's face. Irka dimly felt Pavlik restraining her. She easily brushed him off and marched into the room. She stepped into the pool of blood with her slippers, borrowed slippers of Margarita's. It was a Russian custom for everyone to always take off their outside shoes upon entering homes, since the streets were dirty, always dirty, or muddy, or sandy, depending on the season.

Slipper's soft woolen bottoms soaked in the moisture, making Irka's toes feel sticky. She didn't care. She raised her foot and began kicking Roma's body. She kicked him everywhere, in his stomach, in his chest, in his face. When this didn't seem enough, she leaned over and fisted him. She beat him methodically, sensing hands on her, pulling her, voices shouting. She resisted vigorously, punching, kicking, stamping, hitting. Someone was dragging her away, she still kicked and

kicked, until the baby became restless and slammed into her diaphragm, causing her to pause.

"*Hvatit!* Stop! I said, stop!" She heard faintly, not clear to whom the voice belonged. She grabbed at the doorway, then slipped and nearly fell, her soles wet against the wooden floor. Hands caught from her behind, preventing her from returning to the body. Irka kept slashing her arms around mechanically, staring at Roma's face until she couldn't see it anymore, being dragged out of the apartment.

I hope your death was painful. She said inside her head. *I wish I was there to see it. I hope I was the one to cause it. I hope you suffered.*

How did she end up in Margarita's kitchen, with a wet towel on her forehead and pills being shoved in her mouth, she didn't remember. Her head pulsed, and she felt like vomiting, which she promptly did, covering the table and her sweater with sour bile. She was being helped to the bathroom and stuck her head under cold water, letting it run over her hair and face.

"Irina, talk to me. Are you okay?" Pavlik handed her the towel. "What in the world? Why did you hit him?"

Irka couldn't answer, couldn't even nod. She felt nirvana spread through her, making her feel high. If she could only hit him one more time, but she was too weak now, from emotional conundrum as well as physical, and she simply leaned on Pavlik.

He stroked her head, wiping it. They stood like this for a while, until Yulia opened the bathroom door and ushered them out.

Irka was given Margarita's old dress, and escorted into Anton's car. The sky tinged a pale blue. It was early morning. Irka's breath puffed out in little clouds of steam. She looked around dazedly, letting Pavlik open the door for her. Yulia stayed with Margarita, who nearly lost consciousness when she saw what happened, so it fell to Anton to ferry Pavlik and Irka home.

A couple neighbors gathered by the entranceway, discussing the murder, watching militants arrive on the scene. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary to Irka, except one thing.

She glanced at it, as they drove away. A little ways from the building, parked among other cars frosted from the cold, stood one car that wasn't. It was black. It was long. It had tinted windows, and it started moving as soon as Anton's car left the alley and turned into the road.

Chapter 31. The Interrogation

Irka dozed off and lost track of their followers. She had no chance to warn Pavlik. He was discharged to take care of Margarita. Freed from his presence, for the next several days Yulia and Anton interrogated her on everything starting from her relatives, to her mother's boyfriend, to her personal history leading up to employment at the theater, to the incident where she hit a dead body of someone she must've surely known. Used to being beaten bloody for her mistakes, Irka stoically sat through this all silent, until the night Pavlik came back and broke down, pleading with her to tell them as much as she could. He said their wedding was in jeopardy. That made Irka talk.

"You understand why we need to know this?" Asked Anton for the umpteenth time, sipping his tea with sugar.

Yulia made herself a cup and joined them. "We're taking you into our family without knowing anything about you. It's a big and scary step for us. The truth is, we're doing it for our son. He seems to love you very much. Personally, I have my reservations. One day you'll understand, when you're a mother." She peered at Irka.

Irka couldn't think about much except that black car. She felt sandwiched between two frogs, two pairs of eyes and two pairs of glasses pressing on her from both sides.

"Please, do us a favor. Let's get this over with, so we can move on to happy things. The wedding. The restaurant. The dress. All that good stuff." Put in Anton, with a knowing smile.

Irka looked up, her eyes glistening.

Anton chuckled. "Now I got her attention. Here. Go on. Don't be shy." He pushed a notepad to her and a pen, waiting.

Irka sighed.

"Tell us about your mama. Where she's from, what she does, where she studied—" Continued Anton.

"If. If she studied." Put in Yulia.

She dropped out of school. Wrote Irka.

"I see." Yulia let out a long breath, glancing at Anton.

"Well, that doesn't prove anything. My mama—"

"That was during war, Antosha." Interrupted Yulia.

"Right, right. You're right. Anyway. Please, continue. Who do you live with? Write me the names and the occupations, please. We have important relatives and friends to... uh, how to say it, inform of the upcoming family milestone. They'll want to know. I don't want to butcher any facts, you see." His business attitude shone through, always calculating, always precise.

Irka wrote. *I live with my mother, Marina Marinova, she is looking after the house. My aunt, Sonya, is a kiosk grocery seller. Her daughter, my cousin, Lenchka, goes to school, third grade. My grandmother Valya is a nurse. My great grandmother Nadezhda used to be a factory worker. For clothes. They made clothes. We all live together.* Irka hesitated. *Lyosha Ivanenko is my step-father. He also lives with us.* She wrote it, cringing, hoping during their visit he'd have the presence of mind to behave like one. *He loves me very much, that's why he sent me a scary letter.*

"Interesting way to love someone." Said Yulia with a sweet smile.

Anton sipped tea. "Is that everybody?"

Irka shook her head, and added. *We have two dogs, three cats, a hedgehog and a rat. They live in Sveta's and Valya's room, with Lenchka.*

"You finished school, I take it?" Yulia asked.

Irka wrote and wrote, until her hand got tired. She told them about her neighborhood, her school, her teachers, her neighbors, everything under the sun except about Lyosha banging her for the last year and it being the reason she ran away. She said she had an argument with her mother, and wanted to hurt her by stealing the ring.

"I will hold on to it for now, I decided. Your stay uh... well, it cost us quite an amount." Said Anton matter-of-factly.

Irka gaped. It was her ring, her mother's ring, and he just took it, just like that, without permission.

"Is it... valuable?" Asked Yulia.

Anton sipped tea. "Oh yes. Yes, it is. It'll serve as an incentive for you to speak the truth." He addressed Irka. "A collateral of sorts. You understand what collateral means?"

Irka nodded, without a slightest idea.

"Now, we'd like to know what prompted your aggressive behavior toward, uh... that unfortunate young man. Know what I'm talking about?"

Yes. He hurt me. Wrote Irka.

"So you know him. Hurt you how?" Asked Anton.

Beat me.

"Why? When?"

Irka hesitated. *I stole something.*

"Ah. You're into stealing things? I thought so. The word is, that *shuba*, you took from Terekhova. Famous actress. Tell me, is this true?" Asked Anton pleasantly.

Irka nodded.

"Shame, shame. You understand in this family we don't steal things, nor do we tolerate such behavior. We might..." he broke off, looking at Yulia for approval.

She sighed, pursing her lips, and shrugged, like he was about to suggest something inevitable.

"...have to travel. I'd like to be absolutely sure that you employ your best mannerisms while we do, if we do, if circumstances demand we do it together."

Little do you know, thought Irka bitterly. She knew where this was going. They planned to immigrate to Israel. Not Pavlik. Most recently he wouldn't shut up about John and America, in America you can do this, in America you can do that. He talked incessantly about how Sim was going to take him to New York, how John secured a spot for him on Broadway. *Broadway!* Pavlik would explain. *Can you imagine? Broadway!*

Irka had to admit to Boims that Lyosha previously worked as a butcher. That much was true. He was looking for work now. That much was also true. It seemed to satisfy them. Someone who worked as a butcher, in their opinion, probably didn't think twice about delivering death threats to a step-daughter to coax her into returning. Irka sensed their relief. She thought they were grateful it had nothing to do with Pavlik or them, and she felt sorry she couldn't spill to them their son's secret, sorry they wouldn't accept him for who he was, sorry this entire country couldn't accept the likes of him. She worried about him, worried sick. Recently it escalated to pure anxiety, and she thought about seeking outside help, talking to Sim about the

notes and the black car. For that, she needed to ask Pavlik's permission to disclose his secret, and for that, she needed to tell him hers.

Irka tethered on the edge of indecision. The image of the car wouldn't leave her mind. She hasn't seen another death threat. Pavlik was being very discreet with the mail, and now that Roma got killed, she hoped that maybe without their leader the gang has dispersed. She didn't know how much farther from the truth she was.

At the end of their talk she finally gave Boims her home phone number. Yulia, sitting very still, dialed it and landed on Valya, Irka's grandmother, who was beyond herself with joy that Irka was okay, crying into receiver so loudly, Irka could hear it. Her mother was out, she said, and Lyosha hasn't surfaced for a week now, but she was home and Nadezhda was home, as were Sonya and Lenochka. She was glad to hear about the upcoming visit.

Irka listened to this exchange with a drumming heart, hoping there would be no surprises when they showed up.

To conclude their questioning, Yulia took her to the polyclinic, to see a doctor she knew, a gynecologist, to make sure the baby was healthy, and, Irka suspected, to find out if any tests could be made, to determine that Pavlik was, in fact, the father.

Chapter 32. The Polyclinic Visit

They stepped out of the metro into some newly built Moscow neighborhood, way north. The day was cold, sunny, and crisp. Irka crunched in her boots after Yulia, keeping a certain distance, glancing about. Tall apartment buildings formed a grey labyrinth, pathways between them stomped in the snow by millions of feet. Huddled figures in coats and hats scurried by, some on their way to work, others taking children for a walk, bundled from head to toe, with only eyes and nose on display.

Irka could hardly keep up with Yulia's pace, puffing with effort. Yulia, decked out in a fox *shuba*, her pride and glory, kept talking, warning Irka that she took precious time out of her day to get her to the doctor, and that this particular doctor was difficult to see, and that it was a privilege that she agreed to see Irka in the first place, and that of course it was only due to Yulia's connections, and that Irka should be thankful for it, and—

Irka stopped listening. She noticed movement out of the corner of her eye and was careful not to turn her head. They were being trailed. She was being trailed. Right behind them, that same long black car crept slowly, which was unusual. Narrow

alleyways between buildings weren't meant for both pedestrians and vehicles. Irka thought whoever planned these new Moscow districts deserved to have his arms torn off. Surely, he was a man. Surely, he could've foreseen space issues. Alas. People and cars were forced to coexist together, in the winter pressed from both sides by high walls of snow, piled up during the cold months together with dirt and other debris, and most of the time hindered further by clever metal garages that covered parked vehicles like fluted metal shells, a strictly Russian lack-of-space invention.

In the typical run of things, a car would honk at you from behind, or simply drive on, making you jump into snow, or a puddle, if it was melting. This one didn't, it simply followed their slow pace.

"Watch out. Car! Get aside." Yulia pulled on Irka's arm, and want it or not, the sedan had to pass them. As it did, a passenger window rolled down, and Irka glimpsed a young guy look at her, with a grin and a wink. He was dressed in a black jacket, a black beret hid his hair. He didn't say anything, which was also non-typical. Typically they'd be yelled at, or at least sternly spoken to. Or cursed. Irka thought it just got colder. Her very spine turned to ice. It wasn't anyone she recognized, but he looked at her as if he knew her. Or maybe she was simply paranoid?

"Look how clean it is. I love men who take care of their things." Said Yulia, motioning after. "Young, too. Very polite. Like our Pavlusha. Take my word for it, you learn how to make money on your own, you won't ever depend on anyone. You've got to stand on your own two feet." She looked into Irka's face.

Irka couldn't believe her ears. It went against Yulia's typical monologues she was accustomed to.

"Men come and go. Little do they know about bearing children." Said Yulia seriously. "We women take the blunt of it. If anything happened to Anton, God forbid, I have means to carry on. Do you?"

Irka shook her head sadly.

"That's my point. Keep your job no matter what. Make sure Novy pays you. He seems to have a thing for you. Use it. Get along, get ahead. You're chunky, that's to your disadvantage. Once the baby is born, I'll help you lose weight. You might think I don't like you much. You're wrong. I'm cautious, that's all. Nothing personal. You got that?" She lifted her furry collar. Biting wind ruffled the hairs in it.

Irka stared. If only Yulia knew about Sim's sexual preferences. She seemed to have gotten the idea wrong.

"I want the best for my son. My baby. Hell always be my baby. Soon, you'll understand." She patted Irka's belly lightly with her gloved hand.

Irka couldn't tell if this was a ploy to make her bring money home, once her and Pavlik were married, or genuine care. She didn't trust Yulia, didn't trust anyone, not even her mother. The only person so far she trusted was Pavlik, with intermittent success. He lied to her, it eroded Irka's trust, still, she couldn't help but believe him.

She nodded, prompted by Yulia's tapping foot.

"Good. I want you to tell me the truth." Yulia looked into Irka's eyes, bursts of steam puffing from her accurately painted mouth. "The father of the baby. Is it Pavlusha?"

For a split second Irka was caught off-guard, then she nodded slowly, making sure not to jump out of her skin and not to overdo it.

"Just making sure. Let's go. We'll be late."

Yulia pulled on Irka's hand. She hasn't touched her like this before, and Irka felt flushed with guilt. How could she possibly disclose to this woman everything she was hiding? And if she did, would she understand, would she forgive her?

They turned the corner of the building, and Yulia stopped so abruptly, Irka bumped into her from behind.

"Oh God." Yulia said, covering her mouth. "Don't look!"

But it was too late. Irka stepped next to her, peering at the sidewalk.

Right on the edge of it, a few feet away from a huge dumpster, sat three heads, three human heads, bloody and matted with hair. They were clearly women's heads, hacked off unevenly. Two militants in uniforms dug in the dumpster, rummaging and cursing, taking out body parts and putting them on the sidewalk. It was a narrow street, with no other people present on it at this hour, the wave of morning commuters having already subsided.

Neither Irka, nor Yulia could move, until one of the men noticed them, and yelled, pushing back the hat from his sweaty forehead. "*Che smotrish, dura?* Watcha looking at, stupid? Go away. Go on, get out of here! Enough bloody work here without you gawkers."

Yulia and Irka held hands, standing frozen.

"Get lost, I said!" Yelled the militant.

"Deaf, are you?" Said the other, wiping his nose with a sleeve. Neither of them wore gloves, fishing around the trash with bare hands.

Yulia squeaked something, squeezed Irka's hand and dragged her away. "What a nightmare. Something you don't see every day."

Irka trotted behind, numb.

A few minutes later they arrived at the steps of the polyclinic, busy with women coming and going, some with children in tow, others struggling to heave their baby carriages up the

stairs, fitting them into narrow slots provided for the task, currently covered with ice. Irka and Yulia helped one of them, and proceeded into the hall.

Yulia walked up to a window in booth, past the line, to angry shouts from those standing and waiting their turn, whispered something to the girl sitting inside, decked out in a nurse coat, with bleached hair pulled into pony tail. The girl nodded, produced a clean new medical record notebook and passed it on to Yulia. Yulia shoved it into Irka's hands, tugging on her to follow, up the stairs, into the second floor, their soles squeaking on linoleum. Irka hurried up to keep up with Yulia, a stink of medicine and chlorine assaulting her nose.

Once up, they turned into a hallway lined with chairs and doors. Chairs had pregnant women in them, in various stages of ripeness. Doors had numbers on them. One of them opened.

"Next?" A woman said, without looking up from her notepad, holding the pen in the air. She was petite, her dark hair braided in an elaborate fashion.

"Karina Semyonovna!" Shouted Yulia, tugging on Irka's hand.

"Yulechka? Come in, come in." Said Karina, whom Irka presumed was the gynecologist.

"Excuse me. I was here first." One woman stood, her stomach so large, it looked like she would topple over any minute.

"This lady here. Over here. This lady said, it's me who is next." Said the other one, standing.

"I've been sitting here for two hours." Snapped the first.

"So what? None of my business, is it? I took my place in line like all of us did. *Devochki*, tell her."

"That's right. Doctor, we've all been waiting. Why does she gets to go?" A thin girl with barely any belly gestured angrily at Irka.

Karina didn't say a word, didn't even look at any of them, ushering both women into her cabinet, decked out with a writing desk, a cot, a couple chairs, a gynecological chair, and a frail plant fighting for life in the pot by the window.

"Why so late?" She asked. The olive skin contrasted sharply with the white starched coat she wore.

"Nightmare. What a nightmare. We passed by a murder scene. Brutal, brutal." Yulia recounted what they stumbled on, with added vivid details Irka was positive they didn't see, like increasing the number of heads from three to five, adding mutilated bodies to them, and the like.

"You don't say. What a nightmare." Echoed Karina, hand over her mouth. "People have no shame or dignity anymore."

They continued discussing possible scenarios of what might have led to the massacre, who might've been the killer, if they would get away with it or not, ignoring Irka's presence

altogether, until Yulia glanced at her, as if remembering something, and composed her face. "*Nu ladno, hvatit.* Anyway, enough of this. Please, excuse us for being late."

"No big deal, really, Yulechka." Said the doctor.

"Karina. This is for you." Yulia dug into her purse and produced a box of chocolates and a bottle of liquor. "Anton sends his greetings."

"Oy! You didn't have to. Put it away, put it away!" Karina pushed the bribe aside, unconvincingly.

"From France, Karina Semyonovna. Would be a shame not to try." Yulia insisted.

They enjoyed a bit of a tug-of-war, mandatory in any bribe acceptance, as Irka has witnessed many times, the one giving delicately persists, the one receiving delicately declines. There was an art to it. You had to know what exactly to give, to whom, how much, and when, so as to meet the person's expectations, not to embarrass them, and keep it a sufficient secret to avoid jeopardizing their job. The rule was this. Everyone knew about bribes, and nobody knew about them. This is how the Russian bureaucratic machine worked, oiled by hard to acquire gifts primarily smuggled from overseas, cash exchanges under the table, or sex, anything from petting right in the official's cabinet to outright affairs.

At last, recent familial news and congratulations exchanged, Irka was asked to undress and climb onto the chair, with Karina's gloved hand feeling inside her and on top of her.

"I'd say, about five months? Why didn't you bring her earlier?" Asked the doctor.

"Long story. I'll tell you later. You should come over for dinner. With Denis, of course." Yulia said charmingly, and then added, as if in afterthought. "By the way, I heard about this new testing technique. DNA, I think it is? They extract it from blood. To make sure the baby doesn't have the down syndrome."

Irka knew that Yulia couldn't openly ask for a paternity test, which would lead to questions from Karina and subsequent rumors, but she was sure when the test itself would be performed, she'd ask for everything included there, just in case.

There was an angry knock on the door. "Doctor? Excuse me."

Karina marched over, yanked the door open, and shouted. "You get in when you get in. I don't have ten arms, okay? Now, if you stop interrupting me, you will get in faster."

"But doctor—"

Karina slammed the door in the woman's face.

"They think I'm their slave." She commented crossly, shaking her head. "Meager money, I get paid. Next to nothing to deal with this rubbish. Now I forgot what I was going to do."

"Tests." Suggested Yulia helpfully.

"That's right, tests."

In the next few minutes Irka parted with a considerable amount of blood and urine, and her mind was set. She was mad at herself for being dormant out of fear. She survived worse before, what was wrong with her now? She got comfortable again, comfortable and stable, and she didn't want to ruin it. Pavlik's life was clearly in danger, and maybe precisely because of her hesitation she was putting him in greater danger still. *There is no way back now*, thought Irka, *they'll soon know who the father is, might as well open up*. She decided to reveal her secret to Pavlik as soon as she saw him.

Chapter 33. The Secret Sharing

Pavlik held Irka's diary like it was smeared in mud, his hands shaking. He kept looking up at her and kept looking down again, rereading what she wrote. She made sure to include every detail of her tribulations, staying true to her promise. It was an honest account of her daily life, starting from the day Lyosha showed up at their door with flowers and vodka and finishing with the first of September, the day she ran away. She added one more bit after that, about the gang that raped her, putting her in the hospital, from where Pavlik picked her up. She said Roma, whose dead body she assaulted, was their leader.

Pavlik wiped his face, looking up.

"So much pain. I'm sorry, Irina. Sorry you had to suffer through this madness." He walked over to her and pulled her to the bed. They sat side by side, Pavlik holding her hands. "I'm a coward, such a coward compared to you. Will you forgive me? I should've told you a long time ago."

Irka shrugged. Of course she'd forgive him, how could she not? She couldn't be mad at him, not at the love of her life. To her he was perfect, despite her shaken trust, despite his lies,

he was the best thing that happened to her in her short sixteen years.

Pavlik cleared his throat. "Alright. Here goes. Sim seduced me, at thirteen." He glanced at Irka for reaction.

She nodded grimly, suspecting as much.

Pavlik let out a shuddering sigh. "He seduced all of us, only we didn't know at first, each thinking he alone was the special boy. He created rivalry, to get us to compete. It produced superb acting results, you have to give him that. You see," he wiped his eyes, "I knew I was gay since first grade or so, I just... I didn't know what it meant, wasn't quite sure why I felt this way. I tried asking papa, and... well, he got horrified at the idea. Never talked to him about it again, read every magazine I could get my hands on. Sim told me all about it. He explained everything. He opened my eyes on the world, he educated me, he—"

Raped you. Said Irka with her lips, fuming.

"It's not like that." Pavlik shook his head. "It's... it was... he was gentle. I liked it. He said it was art. He promised to take me to America. He promised all of us. He promised Kostik..." Pavlik's face scrunched.

Irka pulled him into an embrace. She loved these moments, loved it when he was vulnerable, letting her feel close to him, letting her calm him down.

He's still promising empty promises. Irka thought in her head. She was too afraid to write it in her diary, afraid to hurt Pavlik more. He seemed to have blossomed at the idea of moving away, as if he already departed.

After a while Pavlik disentangled himself, and, ashamed, walked to the window.

Irka wrote. *Your turn. Your secret.* She tapped on his shoulder.

"But I just told you—" Began Pavlik.

Irka shook her head. *No, not that. Death threats. Who are they from?*

"Oh, that." Pavlik's shoulders sagged. "That's Konkin."

Irka raised her eyebrows.

"Not the first time. It didn't really bother me, that's why I haven't told you. He's a sort of a theater secret keeper. He sees things but keeps his mouth shut. For payment, of course. With time, he got greedy. They had a fight with Sim, because he demanded too much. I think he wanted a car. Anyway, Sim refused. You saw what they're like. He said, he'll be sorry, said he's calling a war. Whatever. Sim laughed in his face. I happened to have overheard them, you know, thin walls. Both of them probably thought I left, talking in the hallway one night." Pavlik fell quiet, spooked.

Voices trailed from the kitchen under the door. Yulia and Anton had their evening tea.

"Anyway." He continued. "Konkin warned him. He said he'd start by hurting his favorites. He told Kostik about Sim and I. You know how Kostik took it, you saw it. It was horrible. We almost broke up." He watched snow fall in the streetlights.

Konkin harassed me. Wrote Irka.

"I know. I heard. He boasted about it. Called you names. I told Sim, so he interfered. I'm sorry, Irina, sorry you had to go through this. I'm..." He paused, his face close to hers, and said very quietly. "I'm sorry I can't love you the way you want me to."

Irka shrugged, as if saying, *it's okay, I don't mind.*

They held each other, Pavlik gushing out the things he held back, about his love life, his adventures with Sim, Kostik, a few experiments with other actors, also gay. He told her who was with whom, for how long, how everyone knew everything, how people went along with this news of him being Irka's baby father only out of solidarity that bonded all of them, in covering up their secret life.

Irka soaked it in like a sponge, biting her tongue very hard, wishing she could gush as well, to let go of her burden, to tell him every little thing about her life, and yet she couldn't. It made her want to drive her head through the wall,

to make herself scream, make herself utter some sound, something, anything, anything at all.

She stomped in frustration.

"What's wrong?" Pavlik asked.

Irka shrugged, and wrote. *I'm done for.*

"How? What do you mean?" Demanded Pavlik.

Doctor took my blood. They'll determine you're not the father soon enough. I'll have to go back to mom's. I have nowhere else to go, with a baby. She wrote.

"This hurts, you know." Was Pavlik's answer. He turned away, mouth twisted.

Irka ogled him, surprised. What did she say to upset him?

"We promised to help each other. I promised to help, remember? I hold my word. I *will* help. You won't have to live there, not after what you told me, you won't. It hurts that you doubt me, that's all." He said. "Besides, I don't think you can determine the father by your blood alone, I think they have to take mine and the baby's too, or something like that. I'll find out. Nobody asked me to take any tests yet, so we're good, don't worry. If they will, I'll think of something."

Irka exhaled, letting out her fear.

Black car. She wrote. *Know anything about it?*

"What? What car." Asked Pavlik.

It's been following us, you and me. It followed Sim after that dinner at the restaurant when someone crapped on his car. She studied Pavlik.

"A black car? Really? I never noticed." Said Pavlik. "How do you know it was following us?"

I should've said something earlier. Irka shook her head.

"That's okay. It's fine. You're telling me now. Have you seen who's inside? Anyone you know?"

Irka wrote that the only thing she noticed that was out of the ordinary was that people inside were dressed in black, both the driver and the passenger, from what she could recall, and they wore black berets, not a typical choice for head ware by young Russian males.

"Berets? Berets..." Said Pavlik.

They kept pondering about this deep into the night, Irka voicing her thoughts that somehow this must be connected to Konkin, and Pavlik arguing that Konkin has never mingled with any of the gangs, as far as he knew. They both grew tired and fell asleep without undressing, to be woken up by Yulia early in the morning. It was the day for the visit. They were going to see Irka's family.

Chapter 34. The Families Meeting

Winter was the season people in Moscow tried to spend inside as much as possible, either in their flats, or at work, wherever work was, or in warm public transportation, like metro, or in their cars, if they had any. Those who were homeless occupied last floor landings of *mnogoetazhka's*, or boiler rooms under first floors, breaking locks and doors to gain access. Days were short, with gloomy mornings and early evenings. If you had travel on the agenda, travel across the city, you were sure it was the only trip you would make that day, before the day turned dark and your patience grew ragged. That valuable lesson was ingrained in everyone's mind, Irka's including.

Nervous, she got ready in several minutes flat. They hastily swallowed breakfast and were out of the building, piling into Anton's car which he had been cleaning and heating for the past hour, shoveling snow from under the tires and scraping windshields clean. It took them a good two hours to cross Moscow from one end of to another, screeching through traffic congested avenues, breaking at lights, dodging crazies who darted across snowy streets to catch that bus or for no reason at all, perhaps suicidal. Irka watched them with the pit of her stomach

fluttering each time. She recalled an incident where she stood on the light, one of those by a major metro station, with a rapturing impatient crowd standing on each end, dying for the light to turn green to get across. *Dying to die*, thought Irka, smirking at the darkness of the irony.

One brave *babushka* decided she'd had it. There were no cars in sight, from where she stood at least. There was a big turn and a hurtling mass of them were coming. *Babushka* didn't see it. She hiked up her skirt, and, *avoska* shaking in one hand, darted across. Seconds later, a *Zhiguli* hit her. Irka remembered it in slow motion. *Babushka's* round dumpy flopped, flew up, bumped on the windshield once, cracked it, bounced, flew higher up still, rolled over the roof on inertia, hit the back of the car, turned once more, slammed on asphalt and was still. Irka also remembered one second of silence that followed it, tides of people pressing on either side of the street, to see. She didn't remember what happened next, but she never ran the red light after that, and she cringed each time someone did, as they did plenty this morning.

Anton had to stop once and bribe a fat militia patrol that kept sneezing into his sleeve. After all, winter was their most profitable season, with accidents and whatnot. After no more adventures, barely talking, they arrived at the shabby Soviet-era high rise that used to be cream in color and now was covered

with streaks of mold and years of dust and grime. Irka's heart skipped. She hasn't seen her home since September.

She involuntarily glanced up to their windows on the last floor. They looked the same. She was scared to go up, so scared that it took Pavlik several tugs to get her out of the car and moving.

An old hag sat on the bench by *pod'yezd*, garbed in *valenki*, boiled woolen boots, old shabby *shuba*, and a grey fuzzy kerchief around her head. She nodded to them, spreading in a gummy smile.

"*Irinocka!* Daughter." It was Praskovya Aleksandrovna, Irka's neighbor who used to babysit Irka and fill her head with stories of angels. "Must be the groom himself." She motioned at Pavlik.

"*Zdravstvuyte.*" He said politely. "Pavel Boim. Very nice to meet you." He turned. "These are my parents, Yulia and Anton Boim."

Irka thought maybe he confused her neighbor with her grandmother, and shook her head energetically.

"Hello." Said Yulia and Anton in unison, startled.

"I know, I know. Took you long enough." Praskovya waved impatiently, wobbling over and peering at Pavlik. "Those coal eyes. Oy, what I wouldn't give to be young. I'd fetch him for myself." She cackled, exposing toothless gums, patting Pavlik on

the cheek. "Go on, don't stand there! They've been waiting and waiting."

Irka gulped. Naturally, since Yulia talked to her grandmother about their visit, the entire *pod'yezd* already knew. They scurried in after the hag.

She chatted their ears off, with no intention of shutting up. "Praskovya Aleksandrovna is my name. Knew Irka since she was this little." She held up her hands as if holding a load of bread. "She like daughter to me. Fed her, watched her. *Val'ka* had to go to work, see. Honest woman. Her and *Nadezhda* both. God forbid to have a child like Marina, worthless *dura*. Never took proper care. Brought man after man. Scum. Alcoholics, every one of them." She pressed the elevator button, flashing them her gums again.

It was very cold on the first floor, as usual, but Irka sweat in her coat. She didn't dare looking back, at Pavlik or his parents, afraid to think what they might conclude. All through the shaky elevator ride, Praskovya kept giving out details about Irka peeing her panties all the way into grade school, about being beaten by her stupid mother, about their cats and dogs crapping all over the place. She stopped on mentioning that Sonya just got done shagging this one new Russian millionaire and got thrown out into the street after he found out she had a daughter, so she was back home with

Lenochka, when the elevator doors opened and Irka fell out, stumbling, dragging a large gulp of air into her lungs.

Familiar door confronted her, familiar number, familiar peephole and handle.

Praskovya unceremoniously pushed Irka aside with surprising agility and pressed the button. The bell ding-donged.

"Brought your daughter, *dura!*" She yelled into the crack.

There was scurrying of multiple feet, then barking and claw clacking on wooden floor. Marinova household couldn't afford one of those padded or metal doors, and you could hear everything from behind the particle board panel covered with peeling paint and eaten at the edges by animals.

"Praskovya Aleksandrovna, is it? Thank you very much for your assistance. I think we're good on our own from here." Said Yulia with a strained smile and purposefully squeezed between Irka and Pavlik, pushing bent shape of Praskovya out of the picture.

"Yes, yes, thank you very much." Picked up Anton.

"*Spasibo*. Very nice to meet you." Echoed Pavlik.

Praskovya grumbled something back, retreating to her flat.

Irka barely noticed, trembling. The door flung open, and a familiar aroma blasted out. Stale warmth, sour soup, dog stink, cat piss, sweat, bad breath, unwashed clothes, vodka fumes. It all blended together and Irka gagged, holding back bitter bile.

They all stood there, all of them. Marina, Lyosha, Valya, Sonya, Lenchka, even old Nadezhda leaning on a walking stick. Kesha and Kasha, two mutts Sonya picked up from the street as puppies, leapt at Irka, barking and scratching at her knees. There was no sign of cats. The hedgehog rested in Lenchka's hands, all curled up, and the rat sat on Sonya's shoulder. As much as it was Marina's hobby to pick up stray men, Sonya's hobby was to pick up stray animals and bring them home, to Valya's initial loud protests and then obsessive adoration, which is exactly what Sonya counted on, leaving her mother to take care of her animals.

"Daughter! My daughter!" Cried Marina and threw herself on Irka, in that moment of affection she granted her offspring in front of strangers. It was always the same, the incessant worship diametrically opposite the hate she displayed toward her when left to family or one-on-one. Irka could never understand it and despised both. She stiffened all over, smelling her mother's hangover breath.

"You look fat." Said Sonya matter-of-factly. "What are they feeding you?" Apparently, that was meant for the Boims.

"Irkadura is here!" Yelled Lenchka, stroking the hedgehog. "With a baby!" She jumped up and down, tapping a rhythm with her slippers.

"Oy. Come in, come in, please." Said Valya, wiping her hands on a *fartuk*, an apron with daisies on it. "Just washed the floor." She added nervously, eyeing the corridor. "Dogs, cats, oy. So much hair, hair, hair everywhere, always! Can't never clean enough." She lifted her head and produced a short rasp laugh, exposing two golden teeth. Irka cringed. She wished she was never born into this family, terrified to turn around and look at Pavlik's face, terrified to face Yulia and Anton after this, but more than anything, terrified of Lyosha.

He stood behind Nadezhda, pinning Irka down with an iron stare, saying nothing. The narrow corridor didn't allow all of them to line up neatly in front of the door.

"Forgot about us. Forgot all about us." Shook her head Nadezhda, pulling Irka into a clumsy hug. "Come here. Silly girl. Congratulations." She planted a smooch on Irka's forehead.

"Whatcha looking at? Take it off. Show us what you got there." Lyosha snapped, his eyes darting all over Irka's coat, watching her unzip it. The zipper got stuck. Beyond herself with fear, Irka jerked on it a couple times, when Pavlik came to her aid. He peeled her fingers off gently, blocking Lyosha out of sight. "It's okay." He whispered, staring her in the eyes. "Look at me, you're fine. You're not alone."

Irka swallowed and nodded.

"Yulechka, your *shuba*." Anton served his wife, turning his head this way and that, trying to decide where it was safe to deposit the precious garment.

"How many of you." She heard Yulia's sweet voice speak up behind her, with a suppressed chuckle. "Big family."

"Like fucking ants in a fucking anthill! All bitches." Lyosha launched into laughter at his own joke. Valya picked it up uncertainly.

"Fat *durak*." Hissed Lenochnka and stuck out her tongue at him. She was the only one brave enough to tell Lyosha what she thought of him. He never touched her, as far as Irka knew, afraid of Sonya's sharp tongue and sharper fists. He was bigger than her, but Sonya, unlike Marina, had a fierce spirit inherited from Nadezhda. Sonya's only shortcoming was, she was hardly home and she thought Irka an idiot, that's why Irka stopped seeking her aunt's help. She tried once, to which Sonya said, "your own fault. You need to learn to fight back, you mute *dura*."

"I'll show you *durak*!" Lyosha bulged out his eyes at Lenochnka, but the girl had already disappeared into the kitchen where an ugly table was covered with a higgledy-piggledy of plates, bearing fruits of Valya's labor, as she was the only one who cooked in the house.

There was a flurry of congratulations, then introductions, mostly led by Anton, with handshakes, giggles, names exchanged, and the usual small talk, where are the slippers, was there enough slippers, would it be okay to get in without slippers, and such.

It went on in the background, while Irka studied Lyosha. She noticed something strange about him. A change. He was cleanly shaven, an unlikely sight. His hair was cropped short. And there was a new black coat on the rack in the wardrobe she noticed, when Pavlik hung her jacket, too new to belong to this household. And a black beret. On the hook where the other hats resided, together with kerchiefs, and shawls, hung a black beret like the one she saw the guys wearing in that black car.

Chapter 35. The Talk

Irka forced herself to breathe, to calm down. With intermittent success, they all squeezed into the kitchen, ten people total, taking out rickety stools and carefully sitting on them, as they had the tendency to break. The dogs tousled each other under the table, expecting food scraps to fall any minute. Tabby *Zhurik*, one of the cats, sprung from the refrigerator, hissing, and slunk out. There was a moment of awkwardness, all eyes on Irka, and then Lyosha broke it.

"Pregnant, huh?" He smirked.

"Irkadura got knocked up, Irkadura got knocked up." Chanted Lenchka, bouncing the hedgehog from one hand to another.

"Shh!" Hissed Sonya at her. "Shut your trap or get out of here." She flicked her on the forehead, hard. Lenchka cried out and quickly fell silent, throwing livid glances at her mother from under furrowed eyebrows.

"Daughter! My lovely daughter. Look at you. Pregnant." Said Marina, slurring slightly. She clearly had a good helping of *Zhigulevskoe* beer not too long ago. She regarded Pavlik with a mixture of distaste and jealousy. "This who stole my baby from

me?" Her true self broke through fake niceness façade. "Could at least have told me—"

"Left mother with naught. Not a note, no nothing."
Interrupted Lyosha, taking on his paternal responsibilities, which in his mind started with proper scolding.

"*Pierogi. Pierogi* are getting cold." Interjected Valya, gesturing at the pastries on the table. "Just baked them. Just this morning."

"Stop it, all of you. Have you no shame?" Nadezhda stood up, striking her walking stick on the floor. "We have guests. Ought to behave properly for once." Irka thought how rare of an occasion was it for them to have guests.

"Don't tell me to be quiet in my own house." Lyosha stood, towering over the old woman.

"Your house? *Your* house? Listen to him." She waved the stick in his direction. Lyosha bounced it off.

"Welcome to our wonderful home." Sneered Sonya, looking at Pavlik with a certain womanly hunger that suggested a constant hunt for viable suitors and no luck.

Silent until now, observing the squabble with a degree of surprise that bordered on badly contained belligerence, Boims shifted uneasily.

"May I?" Anton said at last, putting up his hand and standing. "Please, forgive our intrusion into your house. It was

rude of us to come uninvited, and for that I humbly ask you to be easy on us. Our intent was to meet your family, to discuss the future of our children, Pavel and Irina. It's why we're here. We thought you might like a little token of our appreciation for your... hospitality."

He took a bag from the floor, rummaged in it and placed several things on the table, cramming them into already narrow gaps. A bottle of some expensive looking liquor, a box of chocolates, truffles by the look of it. Lenchka stretched out her hand, Sonya slapped it without looking, whispering, "Belgian. Belgian chocolates."

"Perfume for the ladies." Continued Anton, taking out small bottles and passing them around.

"French!" Gasped Sonya, immediately opening hers and sniffing it. Valya giggled embarrassingly, Marina took hers like she was more interested in drinking it rather than dabbing it behind her ears, Nadezhda grumbled. Everyone got something little. There was pate, and caviar, and some other delicacies. Lenchka scored a tube of German gumballs. Last was Lyosha, with a large beautiful bottle of vodka.

"That's what I'm taking about." He sneered, opening it. "Marin." He gave Marina to take a whiff. Her eyes blazed excitement. "First class." She said and took a swig right from the bottle.

Yulia suppressed a cough.

"Consider this the ransom for the bride." Said Anton, propping up his glasses, pushing the dog away, that took on humping his leg and wouldn't leave it alone.

"Shoo. Shoo." Hissed Yulia.

"Just kick it." Said Sonya, demonstrating her suggestion in action.

"My dears. First, I propose we talk about our future plans." Said Anton, wiping his face. He started to sweat. As always, it was sweltering hot inside, and with so many people crammed into a tiny kitchen, it was becoming hard to breathe. Pavlik opened the narrow part of the window, letting in freezing air.

"As future relatives." Continued Anton. "By future I mean the immediate future. The wedding."

There were claps and jeers. Anton launched into his view of the ceremony, delivering a carefully orchestrated spiel on best time to hold it, the restaurant he picked out, whose owner was his friend, the rent of the car, the paid hotel room for the newly weds, and, ultimately, the cost of it all, asking how much Marinova family could contribute to the total.

While he talked, everyone started eating. It was a noisy affair. The slurping, the chewing, the finger-sucking made Irka sick. She kept glancing at Pavlik, who tentatively tried a

pierogi, and then, astounded at the taste, ate the whole thing. Yulia sat quietly, lips pursed, hands folded, not eating anything desperate Valya offered her, politely declining and feigning a stomachache.

"The wedding. Weddings are expensive. We can do the wedding here." Exclaimed Marina, tipsy from the mix of champagne and vodka.

"You out of your mind, woman? On what money? Not until you give that ring back to your mother." Lyosha glared at Ikra, who shrunk into the stool, but held his stare, which infuriated him even further.

"Devil take it. Don't care for that thing. Wanted to throw it away anyway, didn't have the heart. Let it go, Lyosha. Leave it." Said Marina, protesting. Irka noted with surprise tears welling up in her eyes.

"Sure you do. Sure you care. Where is it?" He bulged out his piggy eyes.

"Excuse me. May I interrupt? I'm afraid Irina has parted with your wedding ring, Marina, to help pay for her stay with us. At the time we didn't know it was stolen. Our apologies." Said Anton quietly. "You see, she's been living with us for the past several months, without any financial assistance from you."

It's all about money for you, isn't it. Thought Irka bitterly.

"Fuck if we knew where the *dura* was!" Lyosha shouted, the thin veneer of manners broken by what little alcohol he already managed to consume.

"Lyosha, don't." Started Marina.

"Shut up! Man of the house speaks. I'm the one bringing dough here. I got a job. Steady job, making real money, not like any of you, *duras*. What do they pay you, hardly enough for bread, that nursing gig you got?" He addressed Valya who sniggered quietly, not looking him in the face.

"And you?" He turned to Nadezhda. "What can you buy with your pension, a sack of potatoes?"

She spat on the floor and shuffled out of the kitchen, Lenchka on her heels, but not before turning around and sticking out her tongue at Lyosha, without his seeing it.

"I'll be going. Have a friend to meet. Thanks for everything." Said Sonya and sprung up, sliding out and away into the hallway, sternly saying something to her daughter. Even the dogs grew quiet, falling asleep on the floor.

"What kind of job do you have, if you don't mind my asking?" Yulia's stealthy voice startled Irka.

Lyosha sized Yulia up as potential prey.

There was a definite change of power in Marina's household. Lyosha did rule before, by brute force, but he was typically subdued by Nadezhda's comments and always snapped at by Sonya.

There was a clear reversal. He had a job, he made money, he wouldn't have boasted about it if it wasn't good money. A creepy feeling started growing in Irka's chest, a premonition. Images flashed in her head, Konkin, the gang, the rape, the burning White House, the snipers, the feces on Sim's car, the death threat, Roma's murder, the heads on the sidewalk, and the black car, with men inside dressed in black, sporting black berets, sneering at her like they knew something she didn't.

"Security." Blurted Lyosha, straightening proudly.

"That's excellent news. Irina told us you were looking for a job." Said Yulia.

"Did she." He glanced at Irka warningly.

"Irina told us how hard it was for you to remain unemployed and still take care of her family, Irina herself especially." Said Pavlik icily, found Irka's hand and squeezed it. She willed herself not to lower her eyes, staring back at Lyosha, making his face turn purple.

"That's my sweet daughter." Said Marina and belched.

"Whatcha looking at, huh?" Lyosha challenged. "You'll have to teach her manners, that one." He addressed Pavlik. "Sly cat, that's what she is. Playing stupid. I know stupid. All pretense, clever game. This no talking nonsense, using it, she is, to her advantage. Be careful of them women. Show them who the boss is, boy, show them." Lyosha stopped there, surprisingly not

extrapolating any further, somewhat shrinking under Anton's stare and polite coughing.

"Well, we took up enough of your time. Thank you for your hospitality. We'll be going."

"We'll stay in touch, of course, about the wedding." Added Yulia, forcing herself to walk slowly, eager to get out.

"*Dochka!*" Marina fell on Irka, hugging her and kissing her face all over. "I'm so happy for you! My baby is pregnant. My baby..." She kept mumbling something, shifting to Pavlik. "Sonny! We're related now. Come on, give your mother-in-law a kiss." She puckered her lips, stumbled and missed.

Irka barely tolerated Marina's drunken hold, disgusted. She knew it was for show, she could feel her mother's hands squeezing her a bit too hard, wanting to cause her pain, envious, angry, witnessing her daughter breaking out of their misery, the poverty, the filth, of the insanity of their daily life. Irka held herself back, afraid she'd punch her mother, the desire was so strong. She dared searching among coats a bit too long, making sure her arm brushed on Lyosha's jacket. Something red flashed at her from his sleeve, when his heavy hand landed on her shoulder, turning her around.

Almost immediately, Pavlik carefully took it off, taking Irka by both shoulders. "If you'll excuse me, Lyosha, I'll take

it over from here." He stood barely a foot from the bloated figure that reeked vodka breath.

"Davay, davay. That you do. I'll keep my watch, to make sure you do." Said Lyosha, narrowing his eyes at the boy but not daring to say or do anything else under the scrutiny of his parents. He threw Irka a murderous look, indicating that it wasn't over between them.

Once outside, Irka took a shuddering breath.

"Well? Did you learn what you wanted to learn?" Said Pavlik shrilly, stopping a few paces in front of the car.

Both Anton and Yulia turned around, a question on their faces. "What are you talking about, Pavlusha?" Asked Anton.

"I said, did you?" His voice broke from effort. "Did you learn what you wanted to learn? Happy now? Please, enlighten me. Are you happy now?" There were tears in his voice.

He looked at Irka, grabbed her hand and pulled her closer to him. Irka pressed her face into his jacket.

"Answer me!" He demanded.

"Pavlusha, what's the matter? Can we talk about this later?" Said Yulia.

"Don't you see?" He kept going loudly. "You're hurting her. Everyone's hurting her. Can't you leave her be? Leave her in peace? All of you. You too!" He shouted, looking up at the windows of Irka's flat, from where Sonya and Lenochka were

witnessing them. That was not all. Several other neighbors poked out their heads, to participate in the free entertainment.

"What's wrong with you, people? How can you live like this? It's fake, all fake! It's all about money for you, is it?"

Irka flinched at this, it's as if Pavlik read her thoughts.

Pavlik was on a roll. "Where is that worldly love you told me about, papa? Where is it, I don't see it. Show me, mama. Can't a human being love another human being? What difference does it make, family, status, education, gender, age? What's that got to do with anything? I want to know. Please. Tell me. Tell me!"

Tears streamed from his eyes. Irka quietly wiped them off. She felt pain pour out of usually reserved Pavlik, his pain over Kostik, over his broken love, over Sim, over everything.

"Pavlusha..." Yulia began, uncertain.

"Come on." He whispered to Irka, dejected.

They sat in the car, silent and gloomy. Nobody spoke for the entire two hours it took them to get back, and this time both Irka and Pavlik noticed a black car trailing them, but only for a little while, then it was off, lost in the rest of the traffic.

Chapter 36. The Move

The next month flew by like a day, filled with preparations for the move. Pavlik's room was cleaned out and packed, everything stuffed into boxes, to prepare for Margarita Boim to make an entrance, which, as it turned out, was always Yulia's plan. Her mother was getting older, and Pavlik's early marriage had only accelerated the process and also helped somewhat to convince stubborn Margarita that it was time for her to stop living alone, too dangerous it was, too scary. What if she broke her hip, what if she couldn't crawl to the phone and call the ambulance? Yulia was very attached to her mother, and this scenario simply terrified her.

Irka threw herself into helping Pavlik, packing, cleaning, organizing, unpacking, packing again, cleaning again. There was enough work for her to forget the dreadful visit. Both Yulia and Anton Boim avoided engaging in the topic of familial interaction after their son's outburst, speaking in careful tones to both Irka and Pavlik, and largely leaving them alone to themselves.

On the short outings that they did make, neither of them spotted the black car again, but Irka could've sworn she saw it once from the balcony, but by the time she fetched Pavlik, it

was gone. Assuming they were dealing with mafia people, although how or why, he couldn't comprehend, Pavlik disappeared in libraries, bringing home books, buying newspapers and magazines, trying to find information about the men in black berets, with no success. He didn't get any more threats from Konkin, and slowly the whole affair evaporated from their minds, replaced by the worry about the move, about living alone, about the upcoming wedding, the meeting of the relatives, who slowly started trickling in, for dinners, ogling Irka and holding smart conversations with both Pavlik and his parents.

In light of the holidays, the theater was taking a long break, preparing for the opening of the new season in February. There was no sign of Sim. Pavlik phoned him several times, he said he was busy rewriting the play with John's help, to westernize it. Both Irka and Pavlik immediately knew what that meant. Pavlik plunged into a dark mood. Irka suspected he had a thing for John. He also missed Sim. She comforted him as much as she could. On most nights she held him, and once he took her face in his hands and kissed it, saying that she was a wonderful gift, that she held him together and that he would miss her in America, but he'd write to her, write as often as he could, asking her to write to him in return.

Irka nodded, holding back the tears.

He undressed her, slowly, and together they watched her belly move. The baby kicked and kicked, Irka's bulging stomach taking on bizarre shapes, one minute shifting to the left, another stretching up, yet another bulging with what they both thought must have been elbows or knees.

Pavlik lied next to her, stroking her skin, whispering silly things, and Irka tried really hard to memorize this moment, to save it for the future. When she was alone, she would imagine this bliss, and it would make her feel better.

Dear diary, she wrote the next morning, I want to keep it a secret. I want it to be a surprise. If it will be a girl, I will name her Galina, for the nice doctor. If it will be a boy, I will name him Kostik, for Pavlik's love of his life.

It's been decided to do the intricate dance of moving on the weekend. Margarita fussed over her dishes, worrying they would break if transported by a moving company, which Anton initially offered to pay for. No amount of cajoling from Yulia persuaded her mother otherwise. In the end, it took them a handful of trips by car, back and forth, loading boxes, unloading boxes, carefully stepping down the stairs, trotting to the car, from the car, up the steps, so as not to slip on the ice and fall. Everyone was included on the operation, even Irka. She didn't carry anything, but she stood sentinel over the packages, watching them like a hawk. In Moscow it just so

happened that if anything was left unattended for a minute, chances were it would be gone before that minute expired.

Irka stood first by the elevator, then in front of *pod'yezd*, then by the car. She couldn't get in and scurried back home, looking around for signs of anyone following her, her heart jumping around. All was clear. On the last trip she got to go to their new flat, but not before bumping into Margarita who studied her new room with an eagle's eye, directing Pavlik to put a carton of hats over here and a box of shoes over there and a tea set on the table and suitcase full of outdated dresses on the bed and bag and a portmanteau and a handbag everywhere he could fit in between.

"Now, could you be a dear and hand me that basket?" She asked Irka. Irka obliged, carrying it over.

"Thank you, honey." She rummaged inside, and pulled out a tiny thing of orange. Irka cringed. The coloring reminded her of the curtains from her childhood. "Here. I knit it myself. For the baby. Pavlusha, take a look." Margarita beamed with pride.

"Oh, did you, grandma? Why, thank you. It's... cute. Don't you think it's cute, Irina?" He threw a look at Irka and frowned.

Irka's face lost color. Her lips have gone white. She forced herself to nod, not seeing anything except the threads, the orange threads making up the sweater, the threats hanging,

the threads moving, moving in rhythm to her mother's fists, punching, kicking... She slumped on the bed, tugging at the neck of her turtleneck, to breathe.

"Must be the baby, grandma. I'm sure Irina loves it. Thank you very much. If you'll excuse me..." Pavlik took Irka's hand. "You okay?"

She nodded, her vision swimming at the edges. She croaked. It was an actual noise she made, louder than just a clearing of a throat or a grunt. "Irina." Said Pavlik quietly. "You sure you're..."

Irka nodded vigorously, embarrassed, gently pushing him away. She didn't want to appear weak in front of his grandmother.

Margarita kept chatting, unperturbed, partly excited by the change of her living conditions, partly disappointed. "Nice husband you got yourself there, mark my word." She told Irina, without looking, wiping her finger on the furniture, looking for dust. "Helpful, loyal. Well bred, in other words. It's all about the blood, darling. You can see it in his face. I can usually tell if a young man was well educated just by looking at him, how he handles himself, how he dresses." She sighed, pressing down on the bed, testing its springs. "Would you be a sweet and go make me a cup of tea, Pavlusha?"

"With pleasure, grandma. Be right back." He reluctantly let go of Irka and disappeared into the hallway.

Irka gulped air, calming down, the baby sweater in her lap. Her vision returned to normal. It was just a sweater, after all.

"I still can't believe it. Can't phantom what Roma did, you remember, my neighbor." Said Margarita, smoothing her dress skirt and shaking her head.

Irka choked and launched into a series of coughs. Roma's sneering face hung over her, making her feel sick again. Her foot jerked involuntarily, as if to kick him.

"An orphan he was. Always so genteel, so charming. For an orphan, I mean. Well dressed too, him and his friends. Nice coats, nice hats, always in black. Said they worked in banking, now that's a respectable job. He even asked me about Pavlusha's health, wouldn't you know. Saw him in the play, he said. Such a nice young man. Pity, pity. Something like this happens... what can you do? Over forty knife wounds. They still can't figure out who did it." She sighed.

Irka's gut wrenched. *Roma*, she thought. *His friends, dressed in black, they're all in it together. If not mafia, then who?*

Margarita lowered her face to Irka, whispering conspiratorially. "Promise me something. Talk to Pavlusha, see if you can convince him to leave the theater. It's admirable, I

vouch for it, he's got talent. But actors are poor people, only a few of them really make it. He's to go into money."

"Mama. What are you talking about?" Yulia stood in the doorway, apparently privy to the last part of their conversation.

"Now, Yulechka, I wasn't talking to you, was I? If you must know, it's something I told you this a million times." Margarita snapped.

"What is it, mama? What exactly? There are many things you've told me a million times." Yulia's eyes blazed.

"Don't take that tone with me." Said Margarita sternly. "I'm worried about Pavlusha, that's all. Aren't you? It was one thing he was alone, I understand the desire to play around, but he has a family to look after now. How exactly will he do that, by making monkey faces on the stage? No respectable man—"

"Mama, he is an artist. It was his choice."

"Just like it was making this baby, I presume?"

"Please. Can we not talk about this?" Yulia hissed.

"You very well know, honey, if not for that rascal Sim, the boy would've gone into Economics school like you and Anton wanted him to." Margarita glared at her daughter. "Fashionable this season, gone the next. That's what happened to Abram."

"I know what happened to papa, no need to remind me." Countered Yulia.

"Tea, grandma?" Pavlik resurfaced from behind his mother, a tray with steaming cup and a saucer with sugar in his hands.

"Yes, tea. Please. Put in on the table, be a dear. What I'm saying is..." She continued, searching for the right words.

"My guess is, this discussion is concerning my career choice? Am I right?" Asked Pavlik politely while taking the items from the tray and putting them on a crocheted serviette.

"Don't see why your mother doesn't want me to state my opinion. Don't take me wrong, my boy, you're very talented. I've seen you perform, but acting is not a sustainable job nowadays." Margarita shifted. "You forgot the spoon, honey."

"And what is a sustainable career choice nowadays, *mamochka*?" Asked Yulia with carefully hidden sarcasm.

"Goodness. You don't need me to tell you that." Margarita pursed her lips, blowing on her tea. "Real estate, of course. Investments. Property. Banking. People are making money by buying and selling currency. Roma's friends are in banking. He was moving big money, got some Mafiosi jealous, that's why he was killed."

"What's the excitement? I heard something about big money?" Anton waddled out of his cabinet and peered into the room, propping up his glasses.

Irka suffocated. All at once she couldn't stand this family anymore. There were layers and layers of unspoken sentiments,

and she'd prefer it if they said what they meant to each other's faces, as opposed to hiding behind carefully orchestrated social appropriateness masks.

"Excuse me. Do you mind? Irina is not feeling well. She is tired, and, frankly, you're the ones who are tiring her with this unnecessary confrontation. I'd prefer it if you were a little more considerate of my future wife's health." Said Pavlik, putting his hand on Irka's shoulder.

She beamed.

"Now that's admirable, Pavlusha. Such care, such devotion. That's how it was done in my times." Smiled Margarita.

"Pavlusha is right. It's getting dark." Added Anton, looking at his wife.

"Am I the one making everyone late? I don't see how it's applicable to me." Said Yulia, obviously insulted.

"Well, off you go, please. You're in my way. I need to unpack and get ready for bed." Said Margarita, irritated.

"No, mama, I'm not leaving you alone. I'm staying here." Said Yulia firmly.

"Suit yourself." Said Margarita, pulling out dresser drawers and stuffing them with her many silk scarves and shawls and neckerchiefs.

"Papa, I'll carry whatever is left." Pavlik motioned to the last items in the corner. Too valuable to transport in boxes,

they were wrapped in towels, a computer, a TV, a VCR player, a music console, to be held in people's laps for safety and so as not to break them. "Irina, you okay walking down to the car on your own?"

Irka nodded, happy to make herself useful. She slid the orange sweater off her lap, making it look like she forgot about it, wobbled out after Pavlik and put on her coat, thrilled and agitated. Throughout their drive she kept thinking about Roma's dead face, the knife wounds, and Margarita's words, her mentioning of Roma's friends, nicely dressed young men, in black, working in banking. Her mind connected the dots, working out a maze of events that was surely conducted by the same people, surely it wasn't simply Roma's gang, it must have been a bigger organization, with money and headquarters and a unifying purpose.

She soon found out she was right. The minute they entered Margarita's empty flat, save for the furniture, while Anton went to fetch the computer, Pavlik grunted, placing the heavy VCR on an empty chest of drawers, and pulled out a newspaper from his jacket, looking around to make sure they were alone. He couldn't wait to share it with Irka, having discovered it earlier in the day on one of his outings.

"Don't let papa see, okay? We were wrong to think it's mafia. Look. Makes perfect sense." He pointed to an article.

KILLER KNIFED A RNU LEADER IN HIS OWN APARTMENT, said the headline. Below was a picture of a man with a deflated face and empty eyes. But that didn't bother Irka. What bothered her was how he was dressed, in a black uniform and a beret, with a red band over his sleeve, sporting some kind of an emblem.

She pointed to RNU questioningly.

"Russian National Unity. They're like Nazis. Want to clean out mother Russia, you know, of filth like me." Said Pavlik bitterly, just as Anton ran into the flat, panting. "Stole! They stole it! All of it!"

Chapter 37. The Final Threat

They rushed out to the car and stopped by it, gaping in shock. In the ten or so minutes that it was left unattended, while Irka talked to Pavlik inside and Anton made his way down to carry the heavy items upstairs, someone has smashed all the windows and taken out everything inside, the TV, the computer, and the rest. They didn't stop at that. Every tire got slashed with a knife. Air hissed out of the slits. Broken glass twinkled on the snowy road.

"Oh my God. My car. My car." Anton kept repeating, billows of steam trailing from his mouth. "They broke into my car, morons." He glanced at both Irka and Pavlik helplessly, twisting around to see if anyone was in the process of running or driving away. He soon gave up, knowing it was futile, as was calling militia in these cases. Whoever did this, managed to also disable his car alarm. These were professionals, and professionals were not easily spotted, typically working in tandem with local militants, for a share of the profit.

"Did you check the glove compartment, papa? Did you have anything in there they could've taken?" Said Pavlik abruptly, nearly yelling.

"No, no, I didn't check." Said Anton distractedly, peering inside.

In this moment Pavlik snatched a piece of paper from under the windshield wiper, obscured by the snow. He thrust it into Irka's hand, without looking, walking over to his father to continue distracting him. Irka opened it, quickly reading what she could make out under the streetlight and stuffed it into a pocket, her heart hammering. She glanced about nervously, trying to decipher movement around them, to no avail.

The street was dead, evening swallowed it. Rare dog walkers hastily made their way out and back, with only enough time for their dogs to stain snow yellow and disappear inside *pod'yezd*, in their apartments, where it was warm, where they could lock themselves away from the reality outside, pretending like everything was fine. *But it isn't*, Irka thought, *it isn't*. Three words pulsed in her mind, three words that she just read.

FAGGOT. Said the note. PREPARE TO DIE.

RNU. Russian National Unity. Irka vaguely remembered seeing something on TV Lyosha watched, a gathering, a man calling all citizens to banish foreigners out of the country, Jews especially, to expulse homosexuals, to clear motherland of our enemies whose purpose was to destroy Russia and Russian people, to obliterate our unity. He yelled, it was time to act. He

shouted, anything went. He said, violence would be answered with violence. He screamed, "Russia or Death!"

Irka shuddered. Why didn't she think about it before? They must have known Pavlik was gay. They knew they moved here, knew where they lived. They have killed before, they will kill again. They weren't squeamish about it, not minding if the job involved killing men or women, pregnant or not. Irka thought she would faint right there and then, thinking about the assault she experienced from Roma's gang, thinking about the smears of blood on the walls of his apartment, thinking about the many knife wounds on his chest, looking down at her belly, involuntarily circling her hands around it. Why did they kill off one of their own? Would they dare to hurt her? Would they slash at her unborn? Were they after Pavlik alone or would they kill her in front of him to torture him, thinking it was his baby inside, before slitting both of their throats?

Bloody images flooded her, and she swayed, holding on to the car, her hand melting the snow, faintly registering Anton and Pavlik discussing what to do next and deciding that it was no use to try and chase anyone at this hour, but that Anton's car had to be towed, as it was customary to "undress" unattended mutilated vehicles, or vehicles without the protection of an alarm, with owners waking up in the morning to a bare carcass left, tires, rims, seats, wheel, mirrors, everything that could

be taken, gone. At times entire doors were wrestled off, to be sold on the black market. In a country where you could be killed for a bottle of vodka, anything went.

Pavlik led shaking Irka back to Margarita's flat, where with unbending fingers he dialed a number on a rotary phone, trying to get connected to some towing service on a Sunday night, while Anton danced around the car, flopping himself vigorously so as not to freeze in the increasing cold. Pavlik kept coming up on busy signals or people not picking up the phone at all, which wasn't surprising. Business in Russia in general was a flimsy affair, customers were often left to the mercy of a particular's employee mood, bribes being the only way to get juices moving.

"They're not picking up. I have to tell papa, stay here, okay? I'll be right back." He gently pried Irka's fingers from his jacket. "I'll be fine, trust me, I'll be right back."

Irka employed her death grip, holding on to Pavlik for dear life, the way she did when he was being picked by the ambulance after the White House shootings.

"Irina, please, papa is freezing out there."

Irka hung on him, using her entire weight to hold him put. The front door creaked open.

"Can't." Stuttered Anton. "Can't stay out there any longer. Pavlusha, any luck? Did you call the towing service? Anyone?"

Pavlik shook his head. "Nobody is answering."

"Figures." Said Anton. "I'll try Kolya. He still has a truck, I think. Why don't you go watch the car while I'm here. Not much to watch there, but I doubt they would do anything else to it tonight."

"Of course. I'll do it. Irina, please, you have to stay home." Pavlik unsuccessfully tried wrestling his arm out of her grip.

"What is it, Irina? What's wrong? He'll be fine. You should stay inside, it's below zero. Think about the baby." Said Anton, a tinge irritated.

Irka let go, quickly donned on her coat and stumbled out of the apartment before anyone could stop her. She was determined not to give in, not to yield this time. It clicked in her head. Lyosha's job was security. Yeah, right, most likely he was hired by this Russian National Unity organization, desperate for money, the chauvinistic pig, he was perfect for them. Roma's gang was part of them as well. This left Konkin, who she thought must have been involved in a similar fashion, sending anonymous death threats to Pavlik because he was gay and crapping on Sim's car for the same reason. Who else would be mad enough to do it?

Irka gritted her teeth, seething. This time it would be different. This time she wouldn't be sitting inside, all scared for her baby and for Pavlik. She would fight. If they had the

guts to look her in her eyes and kick her, a pregnant woman, so be it. She'd spit in their faces, she'd claw at their eyes, tear out their hair, but she'd rather die than have Pavlik die and leave her alone. If he died, she was prepared to go with him. Life without him didn't have much meaning for her.

Irka called the elevator. It arrived by the time Pavlik rushed out, mad. "Why?" He asked sternly. "Why are you doing this? I'm not a little boy to be fussed around, you know. I'll be fine."

Irka stubbornly shook her head.

Pavlik sighed dejectedly. They stepped inside and he pushed the button for the first floor. "What do you think you'll accomplish by shadowing me? You think that will stop them? Ha!" He gave an uneasy chuckle. "They know better, trust me. It's all for the scare, to scare me. They wouldn't dare, they wouldn't, simply wouldn't." But his hands shook as he said it, and Irka could see panic in his dilated pupils, in the way he passed his hand through his hair several times, the way he stood and talked and looked around when they exited and stepped into the freezing night.

The car stood where it was, same as they left it. It took another hour for Anton's friend Kolya to show up with his truck and a long rope. They had to switch shifts with Anton twice, coming upstairs to warm up on tea and sweets, Irka never letting

Pavlik out of her sight, looking for any sign of anyone in a black beret or car, not that she could see much at night.

At last, with car's taillights flashing, the broken thing tied by a rope, Anton sat next to his scruffy bespectacled friend Kolya and they departed.

Shaking snow off her boots by the door, Irka followed Pavlik inside and without waiting for another minute, took out her diary from the backpack and sat next to Pavlik in the kitchen.

He stared in his teacup, silent.

Talk to Sim. She wrote.

"No." Pavlik shook his head. "He's got enough problems of his own. Besides, what's he gonna do? Call militia? I can do that. I don't need Sim for that. Not like it'll do any good." He sipped the tea gloomily.

Then I'll call him. Wrote Irka.

"But you can't—" Pavlik caught himself. "I mean, you don't even know his number."

I'll go to the theater then and tell him everything. I think it's Konkin who crapped on his car. I think he's part of RNU. Lyosha is too. Wrote Irka.

"But what if he's not? What if we're wrong? We'll end up bothering him and involving him into all this extra drama that he doesn't need right now. Irina, please understand, he's

working in the new play. It's a bad idea to interrupt Sim when he's in the middle of it. Trust me. I know. I've experienced it on my own skin." Pavlik stood, pacing.

Irka didn't write anything in response. She marched into the barren corridor, took the phone from the stand and dragged it to the table, as far as the cord would allow, lifting the receiver and thrusting it at Pavlik.

"No." He turned away.

Irka insisted.

"I said, no." Pavlik walked out of the kitchen. Irka followed him, trailing the phone behind. The cord caused her to stop in the middle of the hallway. She placed the phone on the floor and peaked into the bedroom, where the barren mattress waited to be dressed, on a narrow bed with a carved headrest that clearly belonged to an old woman and wasn't suited well for a young couple. Pavlik sat on its edge.

Irka tugged on his sleeve. "Irina, please. Stop it." He said tiredly, yawning. "It's one in the morning, anyway. He's probably asleep right now."

Irka tugged again. She knew very well that Sim rarely went to bed before three in the morning.

"Well, what do you want me to say? Hi Sim, can we live at your place, me and Irina, because we're afraid to stay here due to silly death threats from some unknown source?"

Irka shrugged, indicating her indifference as to what exactly Pavlik told Sim, as long as he communicated the danger he was in. She thought since Sim fell victim to similar treatment, he'd at least have advice for him or suggest a course of action, since talking to Pavlik's parents was out of the question.

While they played tug-of-war, the phone rang.

Irka nearly toppled over from surprise.

"Who would that be?" Asked Pavlik, jumping up and running into the hallway. He snatched off the receiver. "Hello? Yes?" His face spread in a smile. "Sim! We were *just* talking about you. How are you?"

He picked up the phone and slowly walked into the kitchen, pressing the receiver in between his ear and shoulder. Irka followed, listening in.

"Yes, yes. No, I'm fine. Irina is fine, thanks. We just moved, today. How did you—" he frowned. "Ah, makes sense. What? Tomorrow?" Pavlik glanced at Irka with significance.

She sat across, soaking in the conversation.

"Of course, as always. Nine o'clock. Not a problem. Okay. Yes, right. How is...? Oh." He tugged on his hair absentmindedly. "I understand. Sure. Absolutely." He nodded once more. "Bye."

Pavlik's eyes contained a concoction of emotions. Irka detected surprise, hurt, and hope. "The Raven, the play. It's

done, the reworked version. We're due for our first rehearsal tomorrow. Sim just got done with it." He hesitated, his lip trembling slightly. "There are... changes."

Irka took Pavlik's hand, a question in her eyes.

"John is playing the main role. I'm... I'm the supporting role, taking over for... taking over from..." He abruptly stood and rushed out. Irka, her belly permitting, scuttled after him, knowing full well exactly what happened and why.

Chapter 38. The Raven Play

They were late. It took them longer to get to the theater, coming from the other end of Moscow and miscalculating the time. To add to this, they got caught in the slow moving crowd upon leaving the metro. Cars stalled in both lanes, honking. A rally was moving down *Tverskaya* street, with a clear aim at the Red Square, one man leading them, shouting into a megaphone, how Russia was corrupt, and how communism needed to be resurrected, Yeltsin to be overthrown, and more socialist rubbish. They waved red flags with golden hammers and sickles crossed in the corner. Most of the marchers were elderly pensioners, Irka saw, once they moved closer.

They broke out of the tide and turned into the arch, bursting through the back door of the theater.

"Hey! Not so fast. Passes." Ilinichna said, without looking up, then glanced above her glasses and melted. "Oy! Oh my God! Pavlik! Irina! Get in, quick. You're late."

"I know." Panted Pavlik. "Sim already there?"

"Showed up one hour ago. Furious." She added, quietly. "Well, look at you!" She scrambled out from the booth, coming up to Irka to feel her belly.

"Did you hear?" She told both of them with a glint in her eye. "Konkin got sacked." She winked.

Irka and Pavlik exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Did he, really? When?" Asked Pavlik, astounded.

"This morning. Pays to be Sim's friend, doesn't it?"

"When did you get back?" Said Pavlik.

"Off you go, you two. Don't want to anger him anymore. I'll tell you more later." She pushed in the small of their backs, and both Pavlik and Irka slid down the stairs so fast, Irka almost fell, trailing behind Pavlik, hearing shouting and applause and jeering from above, rushing into the dressing room, tearing off her backpack and coat and forcing her legs to move fast, wheezing, finally making it onstage where Sim stood, a bright scarf about his neck, throwing up his arms and yelling at his actors, rehearsal, by the look of it, in full swing.

"Off! Off! You're late. Go sit in the auditorium." He flashed an angry grin at both Pavlik and Irka.

Sullen, they scurried down the stairs and sunk into velvety chairs, witnessing John, groomed and dressed in a unitard, which was Sim's signature for most of his actors, male especially, to show off their body and whatever it is they sported between their legs, delivered feverish lines in broken Russian, swinging around a post like around a strip bar pole, shouting at a young actress who descended to him from above, the rest of the troupe

hanging like monkeys off the scaffolding of the giant structure erected in the middle of the stage. It was tall, it had something like a head with a beak, and it had wings.

"The Raven." Mumbled Pavlik, eyeing John with envy.

In a few minutes they finished rehearsing the first act and Sim congratulated everyone on a job well done, John especially, sliding his hand over his ass and massaging it gently.

Pavlik looked away, Irka clasped his hand.

In a flurry of perfume, face flushed, Sim waded down and squeezed in his overpowering shape to join them.

"My darling Pavlik. Good to see you." He grabbed his face and theatrically, with pomp, kissed both cheeks.

Pavlik remained meek. "Hey Sim."

"Why so sullen? Cheer up. Your part is coming." He slapped Pavlik's knee. "Your costume is gorgeous, pussy doll, simply gorgeous. I missed you, you know. Sorry was busy writing, simply haven't had the time to call until yesterday. I see you were busy as well." He pointed at Irka.

She blushed, lowering her eyes.

"How far along now?"

"Five months." Said Pavlik.

"And how are you feeling? Everything all right?" Sim looked into Irka's eyes, and she thought she saw in them real concern, not the pretend one Sim usually showered his actors with.

She decided to go for the blow and shook her head "no".

"No? What's wrong, sugar kitten? You look healthy enough to me." Sim fixed his sliding scarf.

Pavlik looked up at Irka and in a split second realized what she was about to do. His face fell. "No. Irina, no!" But by the time he reached her hand, she already pulled the note from her pocket, where she strategically placed it the night before, and twisted to face Sam, unfolding it right under his nose.

Sam's mouth opened and his jaw slackened. He looked at Irka, then at Pavlik, who lowered his face into his hands. "What in the hell... When did you get this?" He asked, his voice cracking.

"Hello, Pavel! Hello, Irina! How have you been?" Luxurious John, white teeth flashing, walked over to them and bent down across the row of seats to offer kisses.

All three of them, Sam, Irka, and Pavlik, looked up at him like at an apparition from another world.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Sorry for interrupting." He said, disappointed. "Sim, I—"

"Ache of my loins, light of my asshole, would you please wait a little? There is something we need to discuss. I'm sure you wouldn't mind." Sim patted John on the shoulder.

"Not a problem. Totally, totally. See you all later." John's sour face indicated his surprise at being treated not

like the center of the world. He joined the young actress, the one who descended to him during rehearsal and now hung on him like an accessory, looking up into his eyes and catching his every word.

"We'll go on a break then?" Called another actor.

"Da, da, go." Sim waved them off, turning to Irka and reaching over her belly to Pavlik. "Now, my saccharine cheeks, we need to talk about this. Is this the only one you got?"

"What?" Pavlik looked up, focusing on the note. "Ah, this? Yeah. The only one."

"Pavel. Look at me." Sim said warningly. "Pavel Boim."

"What? What do you want me to say?"

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying, okay? Leave me alone."

"Uh, no, I don't think so. Please, answer the question. Is this the only note you've got?" He looked from Pavlik to Irka, and Irka dared to go for the preservation of her love versus the loss of his trust, shaking her head again.

"Oh, to hell with it. Sim, look, I didn't want to bother you with this silliness, okay?" Said Pavlik finally, giving Irka a stare of disappointment.

She shrugged.

"Silliness? You call this *silliness*?" Sim's face turned red, and he shook all over slightly. "Do you understand what

this means? It's not a joke, sweetness, this is a real threat. Have you been watching the news?"

"Our TV got stolen." Said Pavlik in his defense, which sounded stupid to Irka because it was only stolen the night before.

"It was? When?" Asked Sim.

"Ah, forget it." Pavlik stood to go.

"Wait." Sim snatched his arm. "Listen to me. Listen carefully." He stood and annunciated every word. "These people mean business. I know exactly who's behind this."

"Oh yeah? And who is that, Konkin?" Blurted Pavlik.

"How did you—" Sim began.

"Look, why do you care? Why are asking me this? What's my life to you anyway?" Pavlik's voice strained at the end. His eyes welled up with water, threatening to spill.

"Oh, I see. That's what this is about. My sweet boy." Sim lowered his head, scratching it. "Why don't we go to my flat tonight after rehearsal and discuss this, both of you? I'm afraid I won't have enough time to explain right now." As quickly as he took interest in them, he lost it, shuffling out and calling out instructions to actors who surfaced on the stage, apparently back from the break already.

"Irina, why? I gave no permission to share that note with Sim. I asked you not to. Why are you so stubborn?" He grabbed at his hair.

Irka stared at him, tapping gently on her belly.

"Please ask me next time. Please." Pled Pavlik.

"Marinova? Irina Marinova for costume fitting!" Announced a pitchy female voice.

Irka was whisked into the dressing room, losing sight of Pavlik, who got ushered by John with him, to either talk about something, or change, or both, she couldn't tell.

A dumpy girl with fake curls chatted her ear off about this being her first costume assistant job and how she was envious of Irka to get the part and if she could maybe talk Sim into trying her out. Then, out of the blue, she started reciting a poem, stomping a foot out this way or that, asking for Irka's opinion, eventually studying her face and wondering if she could talk, to which Irka shook her head, explaining in this way that she couldn't, pulled on the stretchy garment that made her look like a white bird, feathers flying off badly glued wings on the back and escaped onstage, where for the next several hours she was twirled around by members of the cast, equally garbed into vertebrae costumes. She deduced her part was to let them hassle her, then sit on the floor in a pool of light and croak like a bird that has lost its voice.

Irka thought she could do it, pouring out her pain of not being able to speak. Sim stood in the audience, below her, clapping, a single brilliant tear rolling down his cheek, boasting to everyone about her talent, calling them all lazy asses, as usual, sluggish pussies, as everyone always expected him to, then launching into ripping everyone a new asshole by yelling that their make up was done wrong, their costumes fitted ill, finally screaming into the face of the poor costume girl that she is fat, causing her to run off in tears.

Pavlik sat next to Irka, and lowered his head on her shoulder. "Hey. About earlier. Please forgive me my outburst. You've proven to me once more. You're brave, you're strong, and I'm... Well, like I said before, I'm a coward."

No you're not. Irka wanted to say, stroking his hair.

She noticed Sim pause in the middle of his get-ready-for-tomorrow spiel, looking over both of them as if in a daze, the meaning of which she couldn't understand.

She watched the actors leave, in the background of her consciousness, watched John hang around until the last minute, demanding his usual attention from Sim and departing disappointed, loudly kissing the young actress on the lips in the hopes Sim would notice, but he didn't. His mind was elsewhere, as was Pavlik's, as was Irka's. She was supposed to feel elated, excited, she held the closing part of the play,

like a mother bird of some sort, some artistic way Sim expressed his philosophy on life, but Irka hardly felt anything, except numbness, determination, and horror, deeply rooted horror of the future, of what was going to happen. It dominated her mind all the way to Sim's flat, where they disembarked and sat watching him silently make coffee, tea, and fish out clean plates from the cupboard, filling them with cookies.

"I've got something for you." Said Sim, placing a cup of steaming tea in front of Irka. "You too." He glanced at Pavlik, pushing the cup to him. "Now, listen carefully. Here is what you're going to do."

Chapter 39. Sim's Gift

Money could solve everything, that was the message Irka got from Sim's long talk, interrupted only by him getting another cup of coffee, or taking a leak, or Irka running off to pee, or Pavlik doing the same, only to return to the kitchen for more tea and chatter that provided both of them with some sense of security, the wealth glinting at them from many food packages, the blinking Moscow street lights, the cars rushing by behind the window, the sounds of the busses toiling, the honks, the nightlife that never stopped. It calmed them down and they held hands, listening to Sim talk.

"You have to offer them enough to get them off your back. Talk to your father, he'll help." Sim said, slurping and reclining back into the chair, crossing the legs and taking out a cigarette. "Nobody refuses money, trust me."

"But Sim—" Started Pavlik.

"Shhh. Don't interrupt me, pussy pie. We're not done here. What I mean is..." He lighted the cigarette, took a deep drag and migrated to the windowsill, cracking a pane open, gazing at the falling snow. "Money. Money will silence any idiot in this country. You have to give enough, that's all. They're starving

dogs, the bastards. My theory is, they don't get enough pussy." He let out a billow of smoke, turning to look at both Irka and Pavlik with a smirk.

"That is a..." Pavlik hesitated, "...a very simplistic way of looking at things."

"Of course. Of course it. We are, after all, simplistic animals. We think we're above them, deluding ourselves, so we can pretend that life has meaning. Well, my golden bun, I hate to break the news to you. It doesn't." He took another drag, his eyes dancing in the dim kitchen light. "Life has no meaning. I've lived plenty of it, cookie dough, plenty. I would know."

"Then why live at all?" Blurted Pavlik. "Is that what you're saying?"

Irka inclined her head, thinking. *I know why. For love. We want to be loved. For this.* She rubbed her belly gently. The baby has been quiet lately, and she missed it kicking, hoping it was all right, *she* was all right, or maybe *he* was all right, thinking how unfair she was by wanting to hurt it. Why was it this baby's fault that it was fathered by some nasty swine? It didn't know any better, it didn't know anything, in fact, it only wanted to be loved. Irka felt it, felt it with her gut, with her skin, her throat throbbing when she thought about tiny hands, tiny feet, tiny heart beating inside her, another life, another hopeful to be born into this world wondering why people

killed each other, why did they hurt one another and called it love? Surely it wasn't that, was it? Why else would one want to live? Why, if not for affection? And what if you didn't find any, what then? Did you try taking it by force, is that why these people were angry, why they demanded enemies to leave Russia alone? To serve as a cover-up for their aggression outlet? Was Sim right by stating it primitively, as he usually did, did they really simply had to have enough pussy?

Irka found herself trembling slightly, corners of her eyes itching. *Is that why I've been used my whole life? A convenient silent hole where they cold stick their dick and forget their misery for a few minutes?* Memories flooded her. She shook all over, mad, forcing herself to return to the present.

"Why don't you stay here for a while." Sim was saying to Pavlik, his cigarette gone, window closed, his massive shape slumped into a chair across them.

"No!" Exclaimed Pavlik, standing up. "How do you even... I'm appalled, Sim. To say something like that. I can't leave her alone."

Irka looked at Pavlik with admiration. He really did care.

"Irina has her mother, doesn't she? Can't she simply go home?" Sim asked, his eyes narrowing.

"You don't know what she's like." Said Pavlik, exasperated.

"And you do?" Sim raised his eyebrows, reaching for another cigarette, flicking his lighter.

"I visited Irina's home, yes. Trust me, you'd want to run away from there too."

"Would I? Tell me more, cuteness." Sim let out a puff of smoke, smirking, as if he knew something neither of them did.

Irka sat up straight, studying his face.

"Irina, you don't mind if I..." Pavlik stammered, kneading his hands. "I mean, is it okay if I..." he looked at her pleadingly.

She couldn't understand where he was going with this, staring at him back, and glancing at Sim, who was patiently waiting for them to agree on something.

"Can I tell Sim... the truth?"

"The truth? What truth?" Sim became interested, leaning forward. "Let me guess. How you're a twofaced traitor who used my influence for the advancement of his career pretending to be an innocent homo while banging girls behind my back?" Sim swiftly stood, growing in size, his sudden rage taking over the entire kitchen.

"Sim! No, that's not—" Pavlik tried.

"Then what? What is it, my fragrant vagina, tell me."

"Irina?" Pavlik, shrunken, asked for approval.

Irka heaved, from the injustice of Sim's accusations, and nodded. Whatever it took to save Pavlik's life, she'd do it. She's give hers for his, so what did it matter if Sim knew?

"I'm not the father of the baby, Sim."

Sim didn't utter a sound, staring at Pavlik blankly. "Say what?"

"I'm not the father. Lyosha is. Lyosha is Irina's mother's boyfriend who... who..." Pavlik braced himself to say the word, "Raped Irina. Repeatedly. That's why she ran away."

Sim fell into the chair, wrinkles standing out prominently on his face, as if he's been slapped. "Oh. I will faint. Oh, I'm not feeling well. I can't believe it. Why didn't..." He gulped. "Why didn't you tell me before." He flapped a hand in front of his face, passing air up through pursed lips.

"I couldn't. It was Irina's secret, Sim. I couldn't disclose it without her permission."

They both looked at Irka. She only shrugged. Violence was a part of her daily life, it almost felt unnatural to live without it.

Sim opened and closed his mouth, then the doorbell rang, and he was off, his housecoat flapping behind him, asking who it was, opening the door and letting in drunk John and the young actress whose name was, Irina dimply recalled, Katya. She was thin and pretty, with long hair parted in the middle.

Boasting his usual charm, Sim invited them in, much to John's disappointment, who saw both Pavlik and Irka and got momentarily sober. He hid his displeasure behind a dazzling smile, and Sim served more drinks, more coffee, more tea, until everyone grew exhausted, talking about nothing, and he ushered John and Katya in the guest bedroom, Pavlik into his large bedroom, and Irka into a small room she hasn't been in, with a writing desk and walls lined with books, closing the door and locking it behind him.

"I have something for you." He said with hardly any emotion, paddled over, produced a tiny key, opened a narrow drawer and took out a small velvet box. "This belongs to you, I believe. Also, an advance for the job well done, more after the premiere." He handed to Irka the box and pulled out a stack of crisp clean new banknotes, rubles. Irka took both with trembling hands, she had never held that much money in her life. "You know what, sugar bird? Stay here, if you want, for a while, until things calm down, okay? If you don't mind? I don't have much room, but... wait, here..." He turned around, pointing to a leather ottoman behind the desk, by the window, with pillows and a blanket on it.

"I take naps here, when I get tired of writing. Do you mind? Think it would be okay?" He looked into Irka's eyes.

She nodded, astonished at his attention, and opened the velvet box. Inside, sticking out from the slit in silk lining, sat the ring, her mother's wedding ring.

"Anton Boim is an old friend. I bought it from him, so now you can have it back. It belongs to you, you hear me? To you alone. Sleep tight. See you in the morning." And with a kiss to her forehead, he departed, leaving Irka puzzled and confused.

She sunk into pillows, studying the ring. Somebody has cleaned it. It gleamed in the light of the lamp, golden with rose undertones, beautiful pattern carved along its circumference. Irka noticed something else too, something she hasn't seen before. Inside the band were carved two initials. M and G. Marina and Gerasim. Her mother and father.

Irka drifted into uneasy sleep, wondering where her father was and why he left Marina, thinking how she had to rely on strangers to create some sort of semblance of a normal family, and if it would hold together once the baby arrived, which was only a little more than three months from now.

Chapter 40. Final Rehearsals

For the next several weeks both Irka and Pavlik stayed at Sim's apartment, explaining it to Yulia and Anton by the urgency of the premiere coming up only three weeks from now. Typically Sim liked to rehearse for at least a month but he was late and had to fit the premiere of *The Raven* in the slot between two other plays, one that opened right after the January holidays, and another one that was supposed to be presented by a visiting troupe from US, a big deal for the theater that even Sim with all of his connections couldn't override.

Pavlik talked his father into ferrying the few things they both needed from Margarita's apartment to Sim's, and Irka spent her free time in between rehearsals wandering into expensive downtown shops and boutiques, afraid to buy anything and wanting to buy everything at once, fingering crisp money in her pocket, spending it so far only on McDonalds meals where she ate as often as she could, savoring the fries and the shakes and gorging up on file-o-fish, something she craved more than pickles. It spelled an otherworldly life to her, like John and his very presence, clean, beautiful, perfect. Yes, the people behind the counter were not American, but they said "please" and

"thank you" and smiled at you taking your order, and waited patiently while you decided, and Irka took her time to savor that feeling, bending her fingers and showing the number of the meal she wanted. With time, they came to recognize her and asked for the order just to confirm. Irka felt taken care of, and she gained weight, fast, which was a good thing in her mind. Her baby was growing.

Sim sat them down and confirmed the fact that Konkin was a member of Russian National Unity for as long as he knew him, organizing youth to do debauchery and such, but that he wouldn't dare to kill anyone himself, too much of a coward. He said he couldn't disclose this publicly until Konkin got fired, with a little help from Sim himself. Pavlik said that Irka and him thought Lyosha Ivanenko got employed by the same people. They discussed Roma's murder and how it could possibly be tied to him not performing something he was asked to do or angering the wrong person. Things like this happened all the time. Irka listened quietly, reminiscing about the gang and thinking that perhaps Konkin was the one who sent them after her, to teach her a lesson for rejecting him.

Sim took both of them to and from the theater in his car, and they never ventured out anywhere after dark. Once, while Irka stood in line at McDonalds, a raspy voice behind her said, "Aren't you afraid to walk alone?"

She turned around, feeling her feet give out. Two young lads stood behind her, dressed in long black coats and black berets, both riddled with pimples, sneering.

Irka forced herself to stare, slowly shaking her head.

"Lookie, she's not afraid. Heroic little bitch, are you?"

"Mute *dura*, no use talking to her." Said the other and spit on the floor.

"Tell your sweet kike, we're watching him. Watching both of you, and his time is coming." Hissed the first.

"Fuck it. Come one, *Sereg*. Cunt's got the message."

Irka pressed her lips together and hoped that she could burn him to the ground with her stare, considering reaching out and twisting his balls, hard.

People looked at them uneasily, being in close proximity, listening in. The boys cursed and left, too many bodies preventing them from doing anything else. Irka didn't tell anyone about it, but she stopped going to McDonalds and now ate only in the theater cafeteria, much to Ilinichna's pleasure.

"A baby. Oh my God, oh my dear God. I can't believe you're having a baby." She would feel her belly, tearing up and sniffing into a checkered handkerchief. "Can I nanny it?" There was begging in her voice, and Irka happily nodded. Ilinichna spread in a satisfied smile. "Always wanted a grandchild, to be the joy of my life. It'll be a girl. Round belly, see? You can

tell by the shape." She felt Irka's sides, turning her this way and that, when Pavlik came to her rescue.

"Ilinichna, that's enough, you'll pop her with those old claws of yours."

"Oy, Pavlik, be nice." She waved him off, cracking up.

"Sim is calling." Came John from behind, leaning in to Pavlik's ear, his lips so close they touched it, and Irka thought she saw the end of his tongue quickly lash out and retract. Red crept into Pavlik's cheeks. "We're coming, we're coming." He said, all eyes on John.

Irka's felt an ice pick stab her heart. Yes, she knew it was inevitable, yes, Pavlik was completely infatuated with John, but every time she glimpsed him melt at the sight of his object of admiration, Irka couldn't help but to feel hurt, hurt and envious. How she wanted Pavlik to melt like this in her arms, to look at her with that fuzzy puppy look, to breathe this fast when she was talking... Only, she wasn't talking, she couldn't. On an impulse, Irka turned around and drove a fist into the wall, grunting in pain.

"Irina!" Cried out Pavlik and John at the same time.

"Hey. There they are. What are you doing here? Eating pussy? I'm waiting for you onstage! Now!" Boomed Sim, emerging from the stairs and pressing his arms akimbo, fuming.

Over the last several weeks Irka felt a blade hanging over her, waiting for the prefect moment to strike. Pavlik has talked Yulia into phoning her mother and the rest of the Marinova lot, inviting them over to the premiere which was scheduled for this Friday, and the anticipation of seeing them all in the audience, Lyosha including, made Irka's feet cold. She kept everything to herself, happy for Pavlik to blossom, his acting taking off, Sim applauding him, the chemistry between him and John escalating to a height of art, as Sim called it, spurring them on, for the benefit of the theater, of the divine acting craft, which often resulted in loud moaning and huffing and puffing from behind the wall of the room where Irka slept. She tried not to listen, wondering if they had a threesome, which by the sound of it they did, all relaxed and lovey-dovey to each other in the morning, soon exchanging passionate kisses in her presence.

Irka learned not to pay attention, dutifully doing her part, crying out her mute pain onstage, to the audience that included some of the actor's relatives who got to see the piece performed in its final rehearsals for free, as a special perk from Sim, with actors fully dressed and painted.

Irka, after having to endure a whole hour under the hands of a makeup girl, then being squeezed into her costume by the costume girl, with her hair fashioned by a hair girl to look like crazy feathers, her feet put in shoes that resembled

talons, stared into velvety darkness, hot floodlight making her sweat a little. She imagined herself as a free bird, and she cried, silently, each time, to whistles and loud jeers and hysterical applause from Sim who positively thought she could very well be the star of the show, although her role was very small, the one symbolizing the continuation of life. And soundless. She didn't have to say anything at all, only act it out on her face. Surprisingly, she didn't have the typical stage fright all inexperienced young actors were subject to, perhaps because she's seen worse things in her life to be intimidated by an auditorium full of attentive strangers.

Stage became Irka's escape.

She did though do something unusual for her, something she thought she should've done a long time ago, just in case. Sim had a nice collection of knives in his kitchen, protruding from a knife block. Irka selected a small one, with serrated blade, not too long, not too short, but sufficient enough to cause lethal damage, in her opinion. She wrapped it in a clean dishrag and carried it in her coat pocket everywhere, wondering if she'd have the courage to use it, when the hour came.

Finally, it was the day of premiere.

Chapter 41. The Premiere

They were all nervous. Sim, Pavlik, Irka, John, Katya, and the rest. Even Ilinichna was beyond herself, mopping her forehead constantly, jumping at every person opening the door, shrilly demanding passes and simultaneously divulging the latest gossip about much anticipated premiere. The theater hummed with activity since early morning. Sets were tested and retested, hired janitors swept the stage, actors bustled along corridors, bumping into various assistants, caterers, and the like, all expecting a huge crowd. The tickets were sold out and a line started growing at the main theater entrance hours before the performance, soon snaking around the block, with more and more bundled up spectators rushing up, a lively trade of tickets underfoot.

The Raven was a much awaited new play from Sim Novy, its core theme going against everything Soviet, which was publicized in multiple newspapers and even on TV, where he gave interviews, decked out in designer sunglasses, a sparkling jacket and his typical scarf, stating that he always refused to stage anything for Soviet regime, that all of *them* were stupid, for which he

was called either scandalous, or dishonorable, or pure mastermind, depending on the correspondent or the news source.

Irka half-listened to debates going on around her, on how the play would be taken, how much money they would make, what kind of coverage they would get, and the like. She dove deep inside herself, to flee the hustle and the bustle, only occasionally resurfacing to check on Pavlik, who trembled with anxiety, sitting in a chair next to her, his head back, his face being painted, his hair combed and slicked with gel and sprayed and combed again. She could hear Sim's shrill voice giving out commands, it echoed all the way downstairs, preceding him.

The dressing room door flew open. "Getting ready? Brilliant, brilliant." He poked in his agitated face. Sweat glistened on it with a fine sheen. He had not one, but two scarves on, draped over one another, and a velvet suit to match. "Remember." He croaked, clearing his throat, then repeated, louder. "Remember!"

"Sorry, do you mind? We're working here—" Ventured the makeup girl.

"It's the director!" Hissed the other one.

"Shut your clits!" Sim snapped, then addressed Pavlik and Irka. "Here is what I want. Romance, love, eroticism, grace. And beauty, and love. None of the ugliness, you hear me? I want none of it tonight. The movement, the voices, everything. Feel it,

bask in it. I want love, you understand me? Love. Give me all you've got, my sunny rumps, all of it!" And then, to the shocked makeup girls. "Don't look at me like you haven't been fucked for a month. Hurry up." He turned on his heels and left, slamming the door behind him.

"Fucking faggot." Whispered the girl. "Was that really—"

"Yes. It was. That's celebrity for you. They're all gay nowadays." Said another, tugging on Irka's hair, hard. "All they care for is fame and money. You wouldn't believe the shit he says. So this one time, when I just got hired—"

"Whoa, hold on there." Said Pavlik defensively. "Just cool it with comments on Sim and gays, all right? I don't appreciate them, neither would he. Unless you'd like me to relay this to him and lose your job? Nothing personal, of course, you understand, strictly business." He took a deep breath, his hands trembling.

Irka couldn't believe the change that overcame the usually timid Pavlik.

That shut them up, but didn't stop them from working on both actors with a fierce strength, smashing makeup so that their skin stretched every which way and yanking on the hair.

Pavlik glanced at Irka. "Sorry. I got... out of sorts. You okay?"

She nodded affirmatively. She wasn't afraid of performing in front of hundreds of people, but she was afraid of Lyosha watching her, and it made her mad, made her so mad that she seethed, thinking back to the knife hidden in her coat. *Just in case*, thought Irka, *just in case he tries something funny*.

At last Sim gathered them all backstage. The audience arrived a few minutes ago, and the general buzz of talk reached them, somewhat muted, from behind the curtain. Everyone's nerves were about to snap, Irka felt it in the air.

"Well, my diamond pussies. Why do I sense fear in your ranks? Cheer up! I want you to imagine something." Said Sim, his eyes sliding over every actor. "They're, out there," he pointed at the curtain, "are as afraid of you as you are afraid of *them*. It's as simple as that. Imagine them pissing and shitting just like you do. We're all human. Do your best, feel, dream. Be. Ready?"

They all murmured their agreement. Light music started, hushing the noise. There were a few coughs, and then all was still. They stood, waiting for Sim's signal.

Irka began to sweat. In addition to makeup, she had a mask over her face, a bird mask. Everyone had one, even Sim put one on his face, black like the black raven. Irka heard nothing except her wildly beating heart, her hand squeezed Pavlik's who rapidly breathed next to her, jittering.

Sim raised his arm, looked at the stage technician, up at the gaffer, and slashed it down. There was a click, a creak, a snap, and the floodlights came to life with a low whine. The curtain parted, squeaking, its bottom swishing along the stage, and out they ran, arms outstretched, taking their positions, Irka last, John crying out a greeting and launching into his role, the broken monologue, echoed by other actors while they climbed the raven-like structure erected in the middle.

Irka took her position, leaning on a rod, her stomach feeling heavy, baby restless, skin itchy, pulse accelerating by the minute. She was blinded by the lights, peering into the coughing slithering mass, trying to discern if anywhere, somewhere, she could find her mother or grandmother or Sonya or Lenočka, and being unable to.

She almost missed her part, having to be nudged by Pavlik, stumbling and nearly falling, recovering at the last second as she waddled upfront, facing velvety blackness on the other side of the stage.

John fell to his knees, launching into his spiel, then Pavlik joined, then Katya, climbing down the scaffolding, stretching out her long thin arms. They placed their hands on Irka and were about to drag her around, as the play demanded, making it look like they wanted to tear her apart, when a loud female voice broke their silence.

"Daughter. My daughter! That's my daughter over there! Leave her alone! I said, leave—" She was shushed rudely, as if someone placed a hand over her mouth. There was a momentary diversion, with a few angry whispers and a wave of quiet complaints sweeping the rows in the back, one short laugh, then it all subsided, the actors recovering from shock and continuing the performance.

Irka nearly wet herself from shame. It was her mother alright, already under the influence of alcohol, she could tell by the slur of her words. So they came, they were here, and it was Lyosha who silenced her, no doubt about it. She felt grateful and furious at the same time, for him handing her mother like a piece of meat, like he handled any woman. She thought she heard Marina attempt to say something else and Lyosha slapping her across the face. It was clear and crisp, the sound of impact, skin on skin, and Irka boiled over with hatred. If she could, she'd leap into the audience and beat the living shit out of the pig, she would—

Pavlik nudged her. She snapped out of it, hurrying to the front to the stage on unbending legs, meeting John and being led off, a flurry of actors trailing behind, until they walked beyond the curtain line and the spectators broke into applause and whistling. The first act was over, and now a stampede of

feet announced people migrating to the cafeteria for drinks and refreshments on an intermission.

Irka felt a chair by the wall and slumped into it.

"Hey." It was Pavlik, kneeling next to her. "Irina, what's the matter?" He craned his neck, to look into her face.

"Give it to me. I'll handle this. Scat, I said. No time for niceties right now." Interjected Sam, running up and lifting Irka's head by the chin. "Listen to me." He looked into her eyes.

Irka felt close to fainting. The embarrassment of her family, of her own mother not understanding the difference between real life and play, being drunk out of her mind, kicked the air out of her and she gulped, hyperventilating, feeling water trail out of the corners of her eyes.

"What's wrong with her?" Said a voice.

"I dunno. First timer?" Said another.

Actors gathered around.

"Shoo!" Shouted Sim at them. "Get out of here. Go. Take a break. Leave us. Don't you see she needs a moment?"

Murmuring, the troupe departed, all except Pavlik.

"Pussy pie, do you need a special invitation?" Asked Sim, irritated.

"I'm not going anywhere." Said Pavlik simply, crossing his arms.

"Fine." Snapped Sim, returning to Irka. "Look at me. I want you to look me in the eye and listen. Can you do that?" His voice softened.

Irka struggled to follow directions.

"I want you to understand something. Whatever these people tell you, family, strangers, anyone, even me, is not about you. It's about them. People are full of shit. They like dumping it on those who would take it. Don't. What they say is the reflection of how they feel, it has nothing to do with you. You're onstage, this shiny beautiful sugar mama. Look at you." He gently touched her belly, and Irka felt care in his touch, like he meant what he said.

"You're about to bring life into this ugly world. I want you to think about that. You're about to create beauty. Stand proud. Don't let them beat you down. You're not a little girl anymore, nobody can hurt you. And even if they can, even if they were to beat you bloody, nobody can take this," he pointed to her heart, "nobody, you hear me? Nobody. Forget that sorry woman, she bore you without understanding what being a mother meant, stupid cow, she should've never had children. Some women are not meant to be mothers, get that? Don't mind her. Stop thinking, stop wondering, feel. I want you to feel, to show them, to win over them, okay? Are you listening?"

Irka nodded, her lips trembling.

"Marvelous, marvelous. You're above them, remember, you're creating art. Art is beauty. Beauty is love. I want you to feel love. They are not used to seeing it. They will squirm like fucking worms, covered with grime of their suffering. Let them. It's not your pain, it's theirs. Your job is to make them feel, my sweet kitten, *make them feel*." He annunciated last words separately.

They were holding hands. Irka didn't realize how it happened, but her hands were in Sim's, his warm fingers pressing on her cold ones.

"That was beautiful, Sim." Said Pavlik, his eyes wide.
"What you said."

"Of course it was, my aromatic rump, it's my job." He slapped Pavlik's behind. "Now. Back to work. I want you to watch over Irina. Make sure she's ready." He departed without another glance, leaving both of them pondering over what just happened, Ikra's heart swelling, Pavlik largely speechless.

They barely had time to spend together. The bell chimed once, then two times, then three, and the hall began to feel with chattering bodies, gradually hushing. The music started again, the curtain parted, and Irka bounced onstage, tossed about for what felt like a few minutes, although second act lasted a whole hour, until it was her prime time. Elated, encouraged by Sim whispering from the first row, "*Davay*, sunny

bunny, *davay, davay!*", Irka swept around the huge raven from which actors watched her with abated breath, and kneeled by the edge of the stage, flooded in light, looking into darkness, forgetting reality, forgetting herself, only feeling, feeling the beginning of a new life inside her, knowing it was possible to leave it all behind, her pain, her disappointment, her anger, her hate, her desperation, ineptitude, frustration, paranoia, everything she was plagued with in her sixteen years of life, and start anew.

A shy tear rolled down her cheek, then another, then she wept, openly, without reserve, hands on her belly, feeling movement, but not kicking, more like touching, touching her from inside, and she touched back, unable to stop the flood of emotion.

Music stopped. It was the signal for the end of the play, yet nobody moved, enthralled by Irka's vulnerability, her silence filling the auditorium with the loudest scream she ever uttered. It reached its crescendo, deep inside people's minds, and they erupted in a sudden surge of applause. People jumped from their seats, people shouted, people clapped and whistled and hooted. The racket made Irka disoriented. She thought she'd go deaf, feeling Pavlik and John lifting her and gently prodding her to bow. They all bowed, to the shouts of "Bravo!" and "Spectacular!" and "Genius!".

Beaming like a little boy, raven mask over his face, Sim hopped on the stage from the first row, broke the line of actors, took them by the hands, bowing again, accepting the gratitude, having to repeat it several times before finally trotting backwards, watching the curtain close on the audience that still jeered.

"Extraordinary, simply extraordinary! You've outdone yourself, my sweets, congratulations!" Boasted Sim, reaching out, hugging, kissing, laughing, crying.

Irka was in a daze of adrenalin rush, feeling almost high or drunk or something like that. Since she never smoked or consumed alcohol, but it felt to her like that. She was ushered to the foyer, where the entire Marinova lot hung on her, congratulating, her mother first, her grandmother, Sonya, Lenchka, old Nadezhda with her walking stick. Irka barely registered them all, noticing Lyosha standing in the back, his face contorted with scorn unlike she has seen him display. He met her eyes, spat, and looked away.

"Irina, you were wonderful, wonderful! Who would've thought! Pavlusha, our lovely Pavlusha! Magnificent!" Both Yulia and Anton made it to them, hugging and shaking hands and overall displaying their pleasure.

But Irka was done with this. Horror punctured her elation, leaving her momentarily deflated, empty. She studied Lyosha's

back, thinking about the knife in her pocket, about death threats, and a heavy dread spilled in the bottom of her stomach that no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't chase away.

Chapter 42. The Payment

Everyone got invited to celebrate the successful premiere. Irka filed into the car with Pavlik and his parents, following Sim's fancy sedan. Marina, boasting loudly to anyone who would listen that this here was her daughter and that she was in a real play, a real actress, a real famous actress, promised Irka to show up at the restaurant a bit later, together with Lyosha and Sonya, as they had to take the metro, in light of old Nadezhda proclaiming that she was tired and wanted to go home, accompanied by Valya and Lenchka.

Unable to eat anything, Irka waited for their arrival throughout the whole dinner, anxiously scanning the room every couple minutes. Sim, strangely enough, wouldn't take off his mask, which only covered the upper part of his face, allowing him to eat and drink, and everyone else was busy cheering him on, or cheering actors on, or professing their opinion on the future of art, of theater, of this country, and everything else under the sun.

"You're unhappy." Whispered Pavlik into Irka's ear, once John gave him a breather. "I can tell. Why? What are you thinking about? You were superb. Even Sim said so."

Irka shrugged, exhausted by the emotional conundrum.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" He grinned.

Irka smiled at the irony, unable to restrain herself.

"Thought so. Well, you can tell me any secret, you know. It will safely die with me." He chuckled, a little tipsy.

Irka grabbed at his arm, peering into his face.

"Hey, chill, it's okay! I'm only joking. All cool. Does my hair look okay?" He passed a hand through his locks. "Do you think John—"

In that moment John leaned it to them and whisking Pavlik away to the other end of the table, where Sim loudly proposed toast after toast, clinking first flutes of champagne, then glasses of wine, then shots of vodka, in the end his mask sliding askew.

After several courses and numerous bottles of liquor, Sim stood on shaky legs and told everyone to go home, whining about a headache and worrying about waking up tomorrow on time for the second performance. They were booked for every night. On top of it, he said he had to give interviews and that the press wanted to talk to the actors, to Irina especially, at which point it was decided to depart, to give her and her unborn baby rest.

Somehow both Yulia and Anton convinced Sim that it would be better for Pavlik and Irka to go home this time, thanking him profusely for their prolonged stay and attempting to shove

something in his hand, which Sim energetically refused, getting mad, and staggering out of the restaurant, hanging on the shoulders of John and Katya.

Anton rattled for the entire ride how proud he was of his son, how excellent his stage presence was, what a surprise Irka gave them with her performance, what a miracle of a talent she had, and on and on. Irka didn't listen, fully alert, scanning the streets out the window. After a while Pavlik dozed off on her shoulder, and it took them several shakes to wake him up on their arrival and pull him outside.

"Huh? What? Oh, we're here already?" He tossed his head up, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "I'm okay, I'm okay, let go."

Irka shook her head vigorously, wanting for all of them to go to the apartment together, dread spreading in her chest. It was a nice quiet night. Compacted snow glistened under their feet in the streetlights. It was faultless, ideal, too clean and too unnerving. Irka fingered the knife in her pocket.

"We don't want any witnesses tonight, all right? I think we deserve some privacy at last, to celebrate, our own way." He said playfully to his parents and smooched Irka on the cheek, to their satisfied chuckles.

"Our Pavlusha, our beloved Pavlusha, when did you grow up so fast?" Anton shook his head, took off his glasses, cleaned them and put them back on, sniffing.

"You sure you don't need us to walk you home?" Offered Yulia.

"I'm not a little boy, mama, when will you stop treating me like one? Please, I beg you, stop." He almost whined.

Irka tugged on his sleeve harder, then turned to Yulia, touching the sleeve of her *shuba*.

"Irina, no." Pavlik took her hand off. "Please. We're fine. We'll be fine. Mama, go already, leave us be. It's late."

"All right, all right, as my son says." Clearly pleased with how the evening went, she relented, smiling into her gloved hand. "I'm so proud of you, so proud. You too." She pulled Irka into a hug, their first. Irka stiffened, her heartbeat accelerating.

"Come on, Yulechka. It's late as it is." Ushered Anton.

Reluctantly, she let go, closed the passenger door and they were off, both waving at them from the windows.

Irka stood still, staring at the door of the *pod'yezd*. Nothing was out of the ordinary. There was no black car that she could see, no people in black, it was quiet and dreamy, with snow flurries flitting through the yellow light, hushing noise, covering the ground with layers of white fluff.

"Come on, it's fine. Nothing, see?" Pavlik, shifting unsteadily on his legs, took hold of Irka's hand and pulled her behind him.

Each step made her alarm grow. It's like someone was waiting for them behind that door, stealthily, not making a single noise. Pavlik's hand reached the handle, yanked the rusty door open, and—

Nothing. There was nothing there. Nobody stood waiting for them. Irka exhaled, letting the air out of her lungs.

"What did I tell you?" Said Pavlik, sauntering up to the elevator and pushing the button. And just as Irka began to relax, letting go of the knife, there were footsteps from above, first one pair, then more and more. By the time she turned around, Pavlik heard it too, gaping speechlessly at about a dozen guys, garbed in black coats, black berets, in black gloves, both Lyosha and Konkin in their midst, leering.

It all happened very fast.

No greetings were exchanged, no venomous words, nothing of the sort. Konkin only said, spitting out the stub of a cigarette and lighting a new one, "*Davay, rebyata*, do him." And they were swarmed with bodies, separated. Helpless Pavlik was pinned to the doors of the elevator, dozens of arms working in unison like pistons of a large machine, hitting him everywhere hard and at once, with flat sounds of impact. Pavlik didn't scream, didn't say anything, he couldn't. The breath got knocked out of him with the first blow. Only wheezing and grunting noises escaped from his mouth, his eyes open wide in disbelief.

Irka was grabbed from behind and positioned so that she could see him. Lyosha's beer breath washed over her neck with the words, "Watch, *blyad*. Watch. This will be a lesson to you, fucking Jewish faggot scum." He squeezed her buttock, pinching it, and it jolted Irka out of her stupor. A livid fury covered her vision like a curtain, separating her own self from those around her. She could only see Pavlik's face grimacing in pain, looking at her soundlessly, his lips moving. Irka tried to read what he was struggling to say, and then it hit her. He was saying, *I love you*, repeating it over and over, until one guy knuckled his mouth and his head hung listlessly, his entire frame slunk and slid against the doors of the elevator.

I love you too, to death, said Irka in her head, moving her lips, but she was too late. Pavlik didn't get to see it, his eyes rolling up.

Lyosha grunted, feeling her about, and Irka went berserk.

Emitting a horrible guttural animal noise, something like a strangled roar, she twisted out of his hold, taking him by surprise, yanked the knife out of her pocket and slashed at his face. Lyosha, shocked, ducked in time, so that her blade missed. Nonplussed, spurred by hatred she's been suppressing all these years, Irka, snarling and growling, slashed at him and at everyone around her with such ferocity, that first Konkin, then the few guys who rushed to subdue her, took a step back.

"Blyad!" Cried out Konkin. "Put that away, before I open your ugly face with it!"

Irka advanced. Fear deserted her. There was nothing between her and these men. She pushed forward with her belly, daring them. Such madness was in her eyes that the beating stopped. Guys who were bent lowest, straightened, one of them said, "What the—" before Irka slashed at his coat, not deep enough to wound him, but deep enough to scare the shit out of him.

"The whore is mad!" Shouted one.

"Do her." Shouted Konkin.

"But, Vladimir... she's pregnant." Said another, eyeing Irka's belly.

"I said, do her, moron!"

Irka lashed at him, but then someone grabbed her wrist and twisted it, causing the knife to fall from her hold. "If you keep quiet about this, fat bitch, we'll keep you lover boy alive. You got that?" Said Konkin's voice. Then something hard hit her on the head, and she collapsed, losing consciousness.

Chapter 43. The Aftermath

Irka came to a face leaning over her, bleached hair surrounded by the halo of fluorescent lighting. At first she couldn't remember where she was or how she got here, feeling cold all over, shaking, damp wetness between her legs. Then it slowly came to her, the theater, the premiere, the celebration, the *pod'yezd*, the beating, Lyosha's and Konkin's grins. And Pavlik, they were hitting Pavlik. She jerked and attempted to sit up.

"Shh. Lay still." Said the woman, it was clearly a woman, and the one Irka thought she recognized as the hysterically sobbing apparition in the doorway of Roma's apartment, tearing her hair out the night he was killed. Svetlana was her name, if she recalled correctly, or at least that's what the neighbor next door said when he talked to her, calling her Svetka.

Irka grunted, trying to sit up again.

"I said, lay still! *Dura*. You'll make it worse for the baby. Here. Let me..." She reached under Irka's armpits and heaved her up.

Irka sat, reeling. And then it hit her. The wetness between her legs. Terror stole over her, but she smelled the odor of urine. No, it wasn't the waters that broke, it was way too early

for that anyway, she peed herself. Relieved, she looked at the woman who concentrated on making her stand.

"*Svolochi*. The bastards." She whispered, grunting. "Said they wouldn't touch you."

Irka ogled the woman. Was her flat some sort of a meeting place for members of Russian National Unity? Is that why Roma was killed there? Was she part of it?

She leaned on the wall, dizzy.

"Can you stand?" Svetka asked, her mad eyes searching Irka up and down. "Shame about your friend. I suggest you forget about 'im and move on with life, girly. They won't leave you alone until you do." She scratched her scalp and looked at something on her nails.

Irka stubbornly shook her head, studying the cement floor. There were dried splats of blood. Not many, only a few. She must've been out for an hour, if not more. Panic rose in her, she squashed it by biting the inside of her cheek until her eyes watered. She'd give herself bruises later, for an added measure. She needed to find out what happened to Pavlik, where they took him, and she needed to teach them a lesson. Nobody dared to take the love of her life from her, not now that she tasted it, that she had it, for as long as she could. It was her turn to make the blockheads piss their pants. She didn't know what exactly

she'd do yet, but her mind distilled into cold clarity, fleshing out steps to be taken one by one.

First, find Pavlik.

Svetka prattled on in her raspy voice, asking Irka something. She ignored her, looking at the blood. It smeared in the direction of the elevator doors, only slightly, but enough to make her think and arrive at a conclusion. She pushed the elevator button. It didn't light up as it should have. She thought she heard the cords struggle in the shaft. She kept glancing about in search of her knife, but it was gone.

"Oh God oh God oh God." Said a trembling old voice from the stairs. Some old bag tottered on the landing, wrapping herself in a housecoat and staring. "What happened, huh?"

"Masha! Get your ass back over here. Masha, I said! Where is my breakfast? Imma be late for work, you bitch." A male voice boomed from above, then shuffling footsteps, and an overweight balding crook slapped his hand on Masha's shoulder. "What now?" He hissed.

"None of your business." Snapped Svetka.

Irka reeled. They celebrated late into the night, it must have been an early morning, though she couldn't tell as *pod'yezds* were always a dark affair, which constituted them as the perfect beating or killing grounds.

She pushed the button again.

"Come on." Grumbled the crook, leading gasping Masha up and away.

"Fucking snoops." Snapped Svetka. "Where do you live? Can somebody get you?" She asked Irka.

Irka, oblivious, kept pushing the button, just to make sure her assumptions were correct. Something prevented the elevator from functioning properly.

"Leave it. It's broken." Said Svetka unconvincingly, brushing Irka's hand away. Irka stumbled past her, slamming into the wall, grunting, and beginning a laborious ascent up the stairs.

"That's right. Keep going. I have a phone. You write me a number and I'll call them." Svetka said, as if she was perfectly informed that Irka couldn't talk. She helped her up, pausing every few minutes, until Irka's blood flow returned to normal, her frozen muscles warmed and she took each step faster and faster. They came on the landing of the fifth floor, where their flat had graffiti on the door.

DEATH TO JEWISH PERVERTS.

Svetka walked up to her apartment and opened the door gingerly. "Davay, quickly." She ushered Irka in, but Irka continued her ascent.

"Where you going, *dura*?" Cried out Svetka, snatching at her arm.

Irka turned around with a murderous look on her face. She was determined to claw out Svetka's eyes, if that's what it took for her to leave her alone.

Svetka only shrugged. "Suit yourself. I'm not offering help again. Already breaking the rules, you know. If they find out I talked to you..." She passed the edge of a hand across her throat and made a choking noise. "Harakiri!"

Irka stubbornly continued up.

"You haven't seen me, you hear me? We haven't talked." Threw Svetka in Irka's back. Irka nodded. She heard hustle behind people's doors, as the building began waking up. She also heard rhythmical mechanical whining, on and off, on and off, louder and louder. Her head pounded with a massive headache coming primarily from the back of her skull where she must have hit the floor, and burrowing into her eyes. She felt like throwing up, holding on to wobbly rails, making it to the last floor's landing and stopping.

It was a popular method of getting rid of the body. Beat it to death, then stuff it into the elevator, push the last floor button and let go. Only Pavlik wasn't dead, it seemed like he came to consciousness or maybe he never lost it, attempted to get out and crumpled in a heap across the ledge, preventing the doors from closing. They whined and thumped together every few

minutes, struggling against his shape, then gave up and opened up again. That's why it wouldn't come down.

Irka rushed to him and fell to her knees, hitting the floor and hardly wincing, carefully turning Pavlik over on his back. His head lolled, eyes closed, a trickle of blood oozing from nostrils, but she thought he didn't look as bad as she imagined. She must have stopped them with her pathetic knife attack just in time. She unzipped his jacket, happy it was puffy, thinking its padding is what prevented him to be beaten up worse.

Pavlik moaned, but didn't open his eyes.

Irka steadied herself, making her way to the first door she laid eyes on, ringing the bell on repeat. She could hear people talking behind it, could hear them stop talking. She rang and rang the bell, then started pounding on the door, to no avail. She tried the next one. The bell didn't work and the door was padded, making it hard for her fists to be heard. She tried another one, it had a whiny buzz, and a feeble voice called through the door crack, "Who?"

Irka kept buzzing.

"Who is it?" The voice repeated.

Irka pressed the button and wouldn't let go.

"Go away!" Croaked the voice. "I know your tricks. Go away or I'll call the police!" It's exactly what Irka wanted, ringing and ringing. But then she heard the woman muttering and

shuffling away. It didn't seem like she called anyone, all was silent. Desperate, Irka tried the last door, pushing the bell until her finger went white, until footsteps echoed deep in the hallway together with cursing and a shaved head of a sleepy man poked its way at her, yanking the door open. He wore stretched out track pants and no shirt, tattoos covering his arms and chest.

"What?" He barked, gazing at Irka.

She motioned behind her.

"What... is... it?" He repeated. Moments later he saw Pavlik's body and without a word moved her aside and ran over, kneeling, mumbling, "what in the God's name..."

"Help me." He called Irka. His gestures were measured, like he knew what he was doing. "Put your hand under his head, like that. Hold it. Don't move him, you hear me? Don't move him. I'll be right back."

Pavlik moaned again.

The man disappeared into his apartment and Irka heard him dial the phone and talk to the ambulance people, arguing with them to make it fast, exaggerating Pavlik's injuries, which was really the only way to make them show up promptly, as well as slipping a few banknotes on arrival, to ensure fast delivery to the hospital.

A minute later he was out again, rubbing his face and yawning, shaking off sleep. "What's your name?"

Irka blinked at him.

"Do you live here? Do you know this man?"

Irka only stared, and then she doubled over. Her belly contorted in a spasm, and she clutched at it, bending down.

"You're with baby!" The man exclaimed. "Just my luck this morning. Come here." He led her into a sparse kitchen that clearly belonged to a bachelor and an ex-military, spartan and clean.

"Why don't you talk? If you won't tell me your name, can you write it at least?" He grabbed a notepad and a pen from his phonebook and handed it to Irka, running out and yelling into the door of his neighbor.

"Makarova? Open. It's me, Sasha." There were clicks of the lock, a hushed conversation, oohing and aahing, and, astoundingly, barely ten minutes later, the siren in the street, calls from the stairs, with medics arriving on the scene in record time. Leaving her name, Pavlik's name, Sim's name, and their phone numbers on the paper, Irka stalked out and was swept into the ambulance together with Pavlik at Sasha's insistence, shouting and waving his arms about, warning them that she'd give birth right here if they won't, to which the medics replied that he was a lunatic but took Irka with them anyway. From the words

of Sasha and Makarova they concluded that Irka and Pavlik were the new occupants from the fifth floor that have been absent for the last month or so and must have been victims of burglary and beating, and that Irka needed a doctor to look at her as much as Pavlik did.

Once inside the fake leather smelling salon, Irka grabbed onto Pavlik's wrist with her iron grip, but as soon as the van started moving, fatigue took over her and she passed out.

Chapter 44. The Delivery Ward

Irka dreamt of having a baby. It was easy, it wasn't painful at all. The doctor simply took it from between her legs, and was handing it to her, smiling, any moment Irka would see if it was a boy or a girl, any moment, and then she was rudely awakened, finding herself on a bed in a row of identical cots in a large room, a hand shaking her and a nurse giving her a thermometer.

"*Davay*, princess, wake up. I need you to measure your temperature. Doctor's orders." The nurse, a small shriveled thing of a woman that was young once, handed her the silvery tube and departed to the next girl.

"How many times?" She whined, rubbing her huge midriff. "I just took it, like, an hour ago. Galya, didn't I?" She addressed another girl.

"You asking me? I don't remember." Said Galya, her dirty hair pulled into a ponytail. "*Devochki*, look. The new one woke up." She motioned at Ikra. "What's your name?"

Irka blinked, taking in her surroundings. It seemed like she was taken to a gynecological ward of some hospital, positioned together with other women who were ready to give birth or very close to it. Her first impulse was to get up and

find out where she was and where they took Pavlik, but she felt dizzy and had to lie back down to prevent herself from fainting, the bloating in her belly returning full swing.

"Careful, careful." Galya toddled over, sitting on the edge of Irka's bed. "What's your name?" She repeated. "I'm Galya. And this is Larisa."

Larisa joined them, sitting down next to Galya, pulling up her chicken legs and hugging her balloon of a belly. "What?"

"I don't know. She's not saying anything." Shrugged Galya.

Irka pointed to her mouth and shook her head.

"You're mute, is that what you're saying?" Asked Galya, brusque but with genuine interest.

Irka nodded.

"That's weird. Why?" Said Galya.

Irka felt stumped. She shrugged. Indeed, why couldn't she? Wasn't it time she got over the orange curtains, the beating, the overturned potty, the horribly twisted Marina's face hanging over her? Hardly anyone ever asked Irka this question, and she couldn't have possibly articulated to any of them the real reason for it, she hasn't even fully explained it to Pavlik. Pavlik. Irka jerked, attempting to sit up.

"Hey. Shh. It's okay. What's the rush? You got yourself free lodging and food, girl." Galina sneered, showing missing

teeth. "Didn't she?" She elbowed Larisa, who agreed. "That she did." They giggled.

Irka smiled, trying to fit in, while her mind worked feverishly. She had to find Pavlik, she had to make sure he was okay, she had to tell his parents what happened, tell Sim what happened, and then she had to teach those pigs a lesson, all of them, but Konkin and Lyosha in particular. No, Lyosha first, she decided, she didn't know how but some kind of a force that used to stop her has been broken. She wasn't afraid anymore, she didn't care if she died in the process.

"How far along?" Asked Galya, pulling Irka out of her thoughts.

Irka lifted five fingers.

"Only five months?" Galya lifted her eyebrows, studying Irka's bulging stomach. "You sure?"

"Why did they put her in here, idiots?" Wondered Larisa, wiping her running nose. "This is delivery ward. They should have put her on the third floor."

"We're full, that's why. Did you measure your temperature?" The nurse resurfaced, collecting the tubes, taking Irka's as well, without looking, although Irka didn't measure it.

"So what? We're full here too." Snapped Galya, clearly aiming for an argument. "Look. Barely room to breathe." She gestured at the cots, everyone occupied by a pregnant woman,

most of them dozing off, some sitting on each other's beds in cliques, whispering something.

"What's this got to do with me?" Said the nurse, placing the tubes in her pocket and giving out pills. "Go and complain to the doctor. Or go write a letter to the government, for Christ's sakes. Nothing I can do." She strode out, pissed.

Irka slid her legs off the bed.

"Whoa, whoa there, lie down." Said Galina, but Irka stubbornly tried to stand, reeled, thumped back down and passed out again.

For the next several days she shelved her escape plans and endured magnesium shots in her butt, which made it very painful to sit down, gorged on free food, went to examination after examination by the gynecologists who determined that the fetus has shifted down and was in the danger of being born early and said that maybe she was mistaken as it looked like she was past the six months mark, putting her under IV and promising she could go home soon but probably not earlier than three or four weeks, which made all girls in the room jealous.

The next day Irka received a package with mandarins and candy and a short letter from Yulia, written hastily on the back of a newspaper.

Dear Irina, how are you? I am sorry we weren't able to find you sooner. Pavlik is getting better. Two broken ribs, bruised

lungs, and a concussion, but nothing major. He asked me to tell you that he loves you and misses you and will write as soon as he can. It's cold and it takes me a long time to cross the city to come see you. I was told that visitors are not allowed, so I am writing you a note sitting here on the first floor. Hope you and the baby are okay. I will write again soon. Yulia.

Irka's heart fluttered at that.

Dear Yulia, she wrote a note in response on a piece of paper Galina gave her, watching over her shoulder, thank you so much for letting me know about Pavlik. I was worried sick. I'm feeling good and will be able to leave soon. It's what the doctor said. I will ask them to call you when I'm ready to leave. Please tell Pavlik that I love him and miss him very much and I can't wait to see him. Irina.

"Who is Pavlik, your husband?" Sneered Galina.

Irka shrugged and went out to find the nurse. But by the time she gave her the note, Yulia left, and the nurse came back with it, much to Irka's disappointment.

Irka felt trapped and helpless, like a bird in a cage, deciding to run away, carefully planning for it, which occupied most of her time. She spent five days here already, having witnessed girls whisked away for delivery day and night, their rectums flooded with warm water through enemas, forcing them to flush out all the shit from their bodies, then taken to the

floor below, exchanging written notes with each other, explaining what it felt like giving birth, who they gave birth to, the girl or the boy, their name, weight, height, who they looked like. One woman gave birth in the elevator, before she even reached the delivery floor. It was all fascinating to Irka, but she avoided mingling with the other girls in the ward, smiling in response to anything they told her, envious of them standing at the end of the hall and talking to their relatives on the pay phone after obtaining special plastic change that fit in the thing.

Her goal was to flee. She knew that once she got picked up by Pavlik's parents, if they still didn't deduce Pavlik being gay from the graffiti on the door and both of them lying to them, they wouldn't let her out of their sight, and she had business to do, business that needed to be done a long time ago.

Irka waited for the evening to roll over the clinic, quietly got dressed, as thankfully her clothes were stuffed into the ugly bedside dresser, because the hospital wardrobe was full, and slowly made her way out of the room, once everyone fell asleep, creeping toward the shift doctor's room. The door stood ajar, the doctor gossiping on the other end of the ward with the night shift nurses. Irka slunk inside and snatched the doctor's purse, rummaging in it with shaking hands. She took out the wallet, took out what cash it had, stuffed it in the pocket

of her jacket, holding her breath. There were footsteps and laughter, but they passed, the doctor walking the nurse to the other end of the corridor.

Her heart beating fast, Irka walked into darkness, sliding against the corridor walls, slowly, until she made it the examination room, neglected to be locked, and dashed inside. Afraid to turn on the light or make any noise, she looked about, looking for something, anything sharp, any tool she could use in her self-defense, in case Lyosha would... would what? What was she going to do, provoke him?

Irka had no idea. She was seized by the powerful desire to cause him pain, how, she didn't know, but she couldn't think about anything else, consumed by fury, barely controlling it. She passed her hand over speculums, took a pair of scissors and put them back down. They weren't real scissors, with ends curved and shaped like two combs. Upset, she kept looking, sliding out every drawer, until she found a scalpel, small and sharp. At least something, thought Irka, wrapped it in gauze and stuffed it in her pocket.

She made her way to the elevators without bumping into anyone, doctor's and nurse's chatter echoing in the distance, and decided to use the stairs to stay quiet, making it to the basement and trotting along its poorly lit cement labyrinthine hallways, knowing she would make it out in the emergency

department, as all Soviet hospitals were designed identical, square, garish, and dull, although this one had walls painted some dirty pink color.

At least it's not orange, thought Irka, coming up to the emergency ward, and mingling in with the pack of relatives who brought their injured or sick loved ones, waiting for them to be admitted. Nobody stopped Irka, and she left the hospital, crunching away into the night.

Chapter 45. Lyosha's Lesson

Luck was on Irka's side, for once. The hospital happened to be next to a metro station, and she saw its brightly lit red sign glowing in the distance, making it there in less than five minutes, shielding her face from the snow, determining her location by the name of the station, relieved that it wasn't far from... she couldn't call it *home* anymore, from Marinova's apartment where she grew up. Yes, that's what it was, a place she grew up in and had no desire to ever return to. But where was her home then? At Pavlik's parents place? No. At Margarita's flat they occupied? No. Then where?

Theater, thought Irka. *Theater is my home. The stage. After all of this is done, after I have the baby, after Pavlik leaves me, I'll go back and ask Ilinichna if I can stay there. Or maybe stay with her, let her nanny the baby. No, not Ilinichna, I'll ask Sim if I can stay with him, perhaps he can let me rent a room in his place. No, wait. He's leaving for America. I could watch over his apartment while he's gone. Maybe...* Irka bit her lip, swaying to the rhythm of the moving metro car, seeing and not seeing few passengers who were all occupied with either snoozing, or kissing, or loudly talking about their recent

outing, waving beer bottles around and slurping from them. Nobody paid her any mind, and that's how she liked it. She didn't know where she would go, once Pavlik and Sim left. She decided to worry about it later and put it out of her mind, exiting at familiar station and marching along dark night streets to Marinova's apartment building, spurred by burning rage, and then standing by the *pod'yezd*, looking up.

There was a light in the kitchen, bluish light that suggested that the lamp was off but the TV was on and Lyosha was watching it, probably drinking. Every other window was dark, as was the light on porch of *pod'yezd*, broken.

Irka fingered the scalpel in her pocket, suddenly uncertain. Courage deserted her. She pressed herself into the wall, looking around, straining to see in the darkness if anyone in the black coat was watching her, if a black car was parked nearby, but saw nothing of the sort. Still, her heartbeat accelerated, drumming in her ears. So, she made it all the way here, now what? What was she going to do? Come up to the last floor, ring the bell, wait until Lyosha opened the door and stab him? With what, a tiny scalpel?

Irka took it out, turning it in her hands, pondering her next move. She couldn't ponder for much longer, as the frost bit her nose and started tingling her toes and fingers. She wouldn't last here for another hour, and by the time she made it back to

the metro, it would be closed. There was really no other way but up.

Irka took a deep breath, steadying her nerves, marched up to the creaky door and yanked it open. Stench of cooked food mixed with piss enveloped her, but it was empty and warm in here, at least warmer than outside. Irka suddenly felt tired, her belly tugging down, her eyelids gluey. All she wanted was to be back in the hospital, asleep. Why did she do this? Why did she run away? Suddenly everything seemed to her so silly, so ludicrous, so ridiculous and stupid. She swore to protect her baby and now she was putting it in danger, a selfish girl not much better than her mother.

Irka felt like crying. She was afraid to make any noise, afraid to face Lyosha in this state, and instead of taking the elevator she forced herself to climb all the way to the last floor by slowly stepping up the stairs, until she thought she'd faint with effort. It was empty here, on the ninth floor landing. Familiar door stared at her disdainfully with the peephole. Irka stood in front of it, scalpel in one hand, her other arm rising and falling, rising to almost touch the bell and falling again. Her backpack was back in Sim's flat, together with the money, the ring, and the key to Marinova's apartment. Irka pressed her ear into the door crack. Faint TV noises

emanated from there, together with Lyosha's characteristic snores.

Irka looked at the bell button once more. She simply couldn't bring herself to push it. Weak and trembling, she leaned against the wall and began sobbing quietly. There was nothing she could do, pregnant, nothing, not against the huge bulk of Lyosha, not with this pathetic little knife she had, not with enough muscle strength to stab him.

Her hate evaporated, taken away by horror of what she wanted to do. Was that love? How was she different from Lyosha if she wanted to descend to his level, to hurt him like he hurt her?

Irka wiped her nose, looking around. The bum who used to sleep on the landing was either out or gone completely, but his bundle of stinky rags was still bunched up beneath the stairs to the roof, and this is where she climbed in, oblivious to the stink, shaking all over and rubbing herself to get warmer, eventually drifting in and out of troubled daze, jerking up each time she heard any noise, and finally waking up at dawn from being cold, sneezing and burning.

Irka felt her head. She was falling sick.

Helplessness overwhelmed her. It was still quiet, but she could hear the first stirrings of people waking up, putting kettles on for tea, talking, their alarms ringing, radios and

TV's being turned on for morning news. Valya, her grandmother, always walked the dogs early before leaving for her nursing shift. Irka had to run away or hide, if she didn't want to be seen.

She looked around, and then heard the phone ring. She wouldn't mistake it for any other sound. It was theirs, clearly coming through the cheap door.

"Da." Barked Lyosha's sleepy voice. "Who?"

Irka jumped up and, her heart beating wildly, crept to the door, putting her ear to it to eavesdrop.

"Vladimir!" Exclaimed Lyosha, pleased.

Konkin. Thought Irka. *He's talking to Konkin.*

She didn't dare to breathe, trying to catch every word.

"I tracked him, don't worry. Yes, central hospital. No shit. Why?" He tapped his foot impatiently.

There was barking, and Valya's soothing voice. She was getting ready to walk the dogs.

Irka strained to catch Lyosha's conversation.

"The bitch is not here. How should I know?" he tapped his foot again. "How is that my fault? Yes, yes, I understand, okay? Hmm." Pause "Huh? She'd show up. When?" More tapping. "Quiet!" He snapped at Valya. "I'm taking on the phone, can't you see, you old hag? Make them shut up." He kicked a dog, to its loud squeals.

"Da, da, Vladimir, I'm here. Go ahead. Eliminate, eradicate. Listen. Enough of this fancy, what do you mean? Ah." He cursed as an aside, clearly not meant for Konkin to hear. "We're going for the kill. Understood. When? Got it. Da, da." He slammed the receiver. "Whatcha looking at? Get moving."

"Good morning, Lyosha, good morning." Valya's voice trembled. "Just taking the dogs here for a walk. Just taking them for a walk. Just—"

"Shut up!" He bellowed.

The lock turned, the rusty chain rattled, and Irka was off, climbing the rickety metal ladder up to the roof on instinct, pushing the door and, to her relief, it gave, creaking, before flying open with a loud thud. Irka scrambled out, rolling onto the snowy roof and managing to shut the door just in time.

She balanced on all fours, scrambled to standing, holding on the frosted wall of the elevator machine room, scanning the roof. When she was little, the door was always bolted shut, but some hooligan always managed to break it, and on days that followed, before it was locked again, Irka fled her mother's beatings by spending hours on the roof, looking down, thinking about jumping. And now, years later, she stood here again, fierce wind whipping her hair and freezing her face, steel sky slowly waking up to another winter morning.

They're going for the kill, pounded in Irka's head, *they're going for the kill*. The beating was just a mock execution, to let Pavlik and his family know that they meant business, and perhaps demanding something. Money, said Sim, everything could be bought with money. But they had no money, not unless Pavlik disclosed the reason he was being hounded to his dad, Anton, who was the primary source of the money in the Boim family, or if he stole something from his jewelry lab.

Irka thought feverishly. What did she have? A ring, just one ring. What else? Anything else?

The high rises around her formed a monotone carpet of roofs, dirty and grim, snow trailing from them in wisps on the wind, and suddenly such despair stole over Irka's heart that she slapped herself, again and again, then hit her bloated breasts, helpless, angry, desolate, shivering with fever, standing alone on the roof of the nine floor *mnogoetazhka*, not knowing what to do, whom to ask for help, where to go, how to save Pavlik, how to prevent what was about to happen, and in a rush of dark gloom the likes of which she experienced here before, she slowly stepped up to the low parapet and looked down.

Tiny cars came to life below, cleaned by tiny people, getting ready to leave for work. All she had to do was to step over and fall. Irka lifted a leg and placed it on top of the rail, contemplating.

Chapter 46. Life Or Death

Irka gazed down. Back in the days, when she couldn't make it to the roof, one of her favorite pastimes was to sneak out on the balcony, when nobody was looking, which happened often, pick up tomatoes placed there by Valya on newspapers to ripen, lean over the barrier and throw them down, quickly retracting and waiting for a scream. Sometimes she scored by hitting someone, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes, if there were no tomatoes, she stole eggs from the fridge and threw them. One time she scored big, hitting someone with an egg right in the head. Only that someone ended up being a shrewd man who calculated their apartment location by the position of the balcony, came up, told Marina, and Irka didn't remember what happened after, which meant that the punishment must've been severe.

Irka looked on the street, then on her belly, in a trance, wondering, if she jumped, would she splatter like a tomato, her belly cracking open and throwing the unborn baby out, or would she break apart and cover the street with her slime as if she was an egg, squishing the baby underneath? Was this building high enough to guarantee a certain death? Would the jump kill both her and the baby, or would one of them live to suffer with

some terrible injuries and deformities? Should she wait for Lyosha to leave for work and jump on his head, could she aim so that she actually killed him instantly with the weight of her body, dying herself, or would it be impossible? Would Pavlik be mad at her for doing this, would his parents? Would he tell them the truth at her funeral? And what about her mom and the rest of Marinova household? Would they even care?

A million other thoughts cursed through not so much Irka's mind as her very bloodstream, her lone shape stark against the sky, when somebody shouted from below.

"Hey! Hey, whatcha doing up there, huh?"

Irka traced the source of the voice. A man stood by his car, his neck craned, pointing. A dog barked, then another, then a woman lifted her head and followed the man's finger.

"Irka! Irka, is that you?" Valya screamed, her hand over her mouth. "You crazy! Irkadura, get down, stupid! What are you doing up there? Get down!"

For a few seconds Irka halted from surprise, and in those few seconds a big black Volga rolled up to *pod'yezd*. At the same time Lyosha, in a black beret and coat, lurched out of the entranceway and toward it, simultaneously shouting at Valya to step aside, then following her lifted head to look up.

Jolted out of her stupor, Irka waved arms for balance and staggered back, but she's been seen already.

"Ha! There she is! Look! Irkadura!" Lyosha bellowed, slapping on the car's window. "Ha! I told you she'd show up, I told you!"

Konkin, dressed in black, how Irka has not seen him dressed while he was employed as the theater's manager, stepped out from the driver's side, and stared at the roof.

They all studied each other for a moment, then Irka's survival instinct kicked in, just as Lyosha rushed to *pod'yezd*, shouting, two guys on his heels, Konkin stayed by the car, two more guys ran along the length of the building, to catch Irka if she decided to descend and escape through another entranceway.

Irka, adrenalin coursing through her veins at the speed of a crazed dog in throes of dying convulsions, took off and skidded along the roof, holding her belly with one hand, her breasts with another, to prevent them from jiggling and to run faster. Her feet slipped on the ice under fresh flurries and a couple times she almost fell, catching her balance at the last moment, stumbling forward, to another square block protruding from the roof, its door leading to the stairs down. She yanked on the ice-cold handle. It was locked. Irka stopped, catching her breath.

A typical Soviet mnogoetazhka had anywhere from five to nine floors, and usually about ten entranceways. Irka made it to the middle of the building when behind her the door banged open

and triumphant Lyosha heaved his bulk through the hole, shouting victoriously.

"Blyad! You whore! You just wait..."

He was followed by two younger guys who ran ahead of him.

"There she is!" Lyosha yelled. "Get her!" Spurring them on.

Desperate, Irka yanked on the door handle, but it wouldn't give. Panting, she skidded to the next block, when on the other side of the roof she heard banging, hitting, then a door shuddered and was flung aside. One more guy garbed in black emerged. He must have reached the beginning of the building and made it all the way to the roof to intercept her.

Irka grunted in despair, and ran toward him, daring her fate, making it to the next block and nearly falling, because the door she yanked at with all her force was open.

She heard curses as she slid down, skidding on the steps with her butt, then slumped at the bottom. She was used to being chased, having played cops and robbers with neighboring boys, since, unlike girls, boys never cared that she couldn't talk and admired her skill for finding the best hiding places. One of the rules they all learned, to never be found, you couldn't leave a trace behind. Irka's mind clicked effortlessly into what she had to do. She kicked off her boots, shook the snow from them by slapping them together and, grabbing the rail, half-descended, half-slid down the steps from the ninth floor to the eight,

skirting the landings in between, sliding in her socks across cement floor, holding on to the rail with one hand and to her boots with another. Above footsteps and yells indicated that her pursuers made it inside, calling her names and shouting for her to stop and give up, to make it easy on all of them.

"Irkadura!" Screamed Lyosha down. "I'll strangle you, you bitch! Stop this second! Stop it, I said. Get your ass over here!"

Irka skirted another floor and, deciding that she had enough distance between them to make them confused as to what floor she was on, ran up to all four doors, banging on them, her hands too shaky and panic flooding her with too much adrenalin to be able to ring the bells.

She ran down another floor, and another, and on the next one she saw a door creaking open. A sudden flash seized her, an image of Moscow subway train doors beginning to close, of Lyosha behind her, holding the collar of her jacket, her struggling out of it and rushing into the train. Without thinking, propelled by the desperation of a hunted animal, Irka rushed forward and slammed into someone who was exiting, pushing him inside, feeling the handle behind her, shutting the door and pressing herself against it, winded, water running down her face, her boots clamped in her hand, shaking in front of her.

"Hey! Wha—" Began the guy, shocked, staring at Irka. He was perhaps in his twenties, with a round beardless face and knit cap, holding a briefcase in front of him like a shield.

"Denis? What is it?" A young woman barely in her twenties, a housecoat draped around her comfortable homey body, shuffled out of the kitchen.

Irka lifted a finger to her lips, pleading with her eyes.

The woman looked at Denis, he looked back at her.

Seconds later, there were footsteps and curses behind the door.

"Where the fuck did she go?"

"Down. Go down and check, you idiot. I'll go up. Must have hid in one of the flats."

"Knock!" Pause. "Come on, knock, push the button, moron!"

Somebody rung the bell, and a soft ding-dong trilled across the apartment.

Irka pressed the finger to her lips, harder, and shook her head, hoping against all hope that they wouldn't give her away.

The woman took a step to the door, but Denis stopped her, silently, listening in. Whatever happened behind it, didn't sound too good. He nodded and motioned to the kitchen. Irka couldn't move, air rushing out of her chest in long gasps that she struggled to contain, her knees buckling.

Only now did she notice Denis staring at her middle. His face split in a grin, and he pointed at the woman behind him, tapping her to look. She came up and smiled. She was pregnant too, Irka just noticed, and they were both looking at her with these sunny faces of recognition. Irka let out a shuddering breath, relaxing at last. It was her lucky day, they weren't going to give her out.

Later, sitting in the kitchen, sipping tea and eating cookies, she managed to explain to them what happened, first by gesticulating, then by writing down the flow of events after both Natasha, as was the woman's name, and Denis, understood that she couldn't talk.

"You hungry?" Was asking Natasha, offering Irka another plate of cookies. "Would you like anything else?" Irka blushed, her stomach rumbling audibly. "We have fish, fresh from the market. Fried. My mom's recipe. Would you like some fried fish?" Natasha stood up to go to the fridge, but Denis gently sat her back down.

"Sit, sit. Allow me." He took off his coat and cap by now, and began taking out everything they had in the refrigerator, crepes with minced meat, chicken cutlets, fried fish, salads, and more. It was simple but good food, and Irka could feel love coming off from both of them, noticing two identical golden bands on their fingers.

"Want me to drop you off somewhere?" Asked Denis. "I'm on my way to work anyway. Would be happy to drive you, if you'd like."

"It's not too much trouble, is it? You coming in late?" Asked Natasha.

"No, no, it's okay."

"It is? You sure?"

"Yes, yes, don't worry. You're not allowed to worry right now." He kissed her on the forehead, she leaned in on his shoulder, and Irka suddenly felt an onslaught of tears. Before she could hold them back, they rolled over.

"Something wrong?" Asked Denis.

"Are you in pain?" Said Natasha, standing up. "Would you like some medicine? We have all kinds. My mom's is a doctor."

Irka shook her head, embarrassed.

"You sure? Denis, ask her." Said Natasha.

"You sure you don't need any medicine?" Asked Denis.

Irka shook her head, embarrassed. This was her dream, in front of her, this, this was something she could never have.

"Shh, you're okay. Crying is good. I cry often. Cry it out. Here. Would you like a napkin?" Natasha offered her a napkin. Irka blew her nose, grateful. "Would you like another napkin?"

Irka shook her head again.

"Maybe one to take with you? If you cry often. It's cold out there. You don't want to catch a cold. Here." Natasha stood up, took out a pack of napkins and offered them to Irka.

Irka took them gratefully, stuffing them in her coat's pocket. She started sweating from all this running and had to take it off.

"Do you know who it is?" Natasha looked into Irka's face, her warm hand on Irka's shoulder. Irka shook her head. "A boy or a girl? You don't know? Don't you want to find out?"

Irka felt overwhelmed with attention, and it scared her a little, these nice people. She started thinking about their motivations to be nice. Surely they couldn't be nice to her for no reason?

Unable to contain his pride, Denis blurted, "well, we're having a girl, you know. Guess what we're going to call her. We're going to call her..."

"Denis. Maybe you shouldn't?" Said Natasha.

"Why? I think it's okay if she knows. It's a funny coincidence. Don't you think?"

Natasha sighed. "Sure. I guess. It is a funny coincidence."

"Irina." Said Denis proudly. "We're going to call her Irina. Can you believe it?"

"Incredible coincidence, isn't it?" Echoed Natasha.

Irka wiped her face, looking around, at the orderly kitchen stocked with inexpensive but clean pans and dishes and flowers, every corner had a pot with a flower in it, and she wanted to cry again, it was so welcoming and comfortable, like a nest.

"Do you know the meaning of it?" Asked Denis. "Of the name Irina? Do you?"

Irka shook her head.

"Oh, just wait, it's..."

"It's from Greek Irene, it means 'peace'". Finished Natasha, now as excited as her young husband.

Peace, thought Irka, my name means peace, I never knew that.

"Well, whoever those horrible people are - and I think you should call police, in my opinion-

"What if they won't leave you alone? What if they're mafia? You should call the police." Added Natasha.

"Yes, I agree with Natasha. As I was saying. Whoever they are, I think they're gone by now. Don't you think?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so." Said Natasha. "Maybe you should go look?" She scurried to the window, looking out.

Irka couldn't help herself but start smiling at these two.

"I'm sorry, but I simply can't be late much more. Let me go out and see if they've gone, okay? Where did you say you wanted me to drop you off at?" Said Denis, standing up.

Thank you, was the only thing Irka could write, covering the paper with it. *Thank you thank you thank you*.

"Oh, no worries, no worries at all." Said Denis. "I'm glad we could help you. So. Where would you like to go?"

Irka hesitated, then wrote, *theater*.

"Which theater?"

Irka wrote the name and the address.

"Oh, that is a famous place. I remember I've seen a play there with my parents once, I think."

"You did? You never told me." Said Natasha.

"Sorry, yes, I forgot, it was a long time ago. I know how to get us there. Is that where you work?"

Irka nodded.

"Do you mind if I ask what you do?"

And now, finally, it was Irka's turn to be proud. Her hand shaking, she wrote, *I'm an actress*.

"Oh, this is so wonderful!" Exclaimed Natasha with glistening eyes. "I always wanted to be an actress, but then I met Denis, and..."

"...we really wanted to have a baby, you know." Explained Denis.

Irka didn't know, but she nodded.

After they have safely made it out to the street, with no sign of the black car or people in black, as far as Irka could

see while running out, hunched, to look as inconspicuous as possible, Denis told her on their ride to the theater how him and Natasha have loved each other from high school, how he had to go to the army and Natasha waited, how he got back, they got married and got pregnant right away, and how happy he was.

Irka soaked it all like a sponge, unable to believe what she was hearing. There were people like that? People who fell in love, got married, and were actually happy? It was possible? If it was, what was wrong with her? Why didn't she fall in love with a boy at school? Why did she start shying away from them at the first sign of her boobs growing and then ended up falling for a gay? What was wrong with her? Irka couldn't phantom. She only knew one thing, that she loved Pavlik, and her heart ached from the unknown of his fate.

It ached even more when Denis's small *Moskvich* rolled up to the front of the theater, and they stalled, blocked by a protest, a crowd of people chanting and waving signs, some of them having Sim's face printed on banners with words scribbled across, like "Novy burn in hell!", some simply with slogans like "Protect us from the theater of perverts!" and "Homosexuality is a sign of the Apocalypse!" and "Expel faggot disease from Russia!" and more anti-gay propaganda.

Chapter 47. The Money Solution

Several days later, at the Boim family meeting where Sim was also present, it was decided to sell Margarita's apartment and pay a round sum of money to certain individuals connected to other certain individuals who guaranteed that no more attacks would befall Pavlik or any other member of the Boim family. This, however, didn't include Irina. She had no money to be able to secure the same, being mum about Lyosha's and Konkin's involvement in the whole affair, and no matter how much both Yulia and Anton grilled her, she disclosed no detail about Pavlik's beating, shrugging her shoulders and staring at the wall.

At last, frustrated, both Anton and Yulia gave up on questioning her and resorted to visiting the apartment building to ask the neighbors if they saw anything, continuing conversing with police that finally dispatched a shabby looking militant to look over the now clean first landing floor and, after stating that there was no evidence for him to off of, citing it as a potential domestic dispute, since Irka refused to say anything, stating that he had no witnesses, claimed he couldn't open the case, and it's only after Anton slipped him cash did he pull out

his notebook and scribbled something in it, saying he'll see what he could do.

Now it was over. Now they all sat at the table, eating dinner. Pavlik was back from the hospital, shaken and jumpy, Irka glum and moody, Margarita politely quiet, and Yulia and Anton pulling a thin layer of cheeriness over terror, panic, and helplessness. Only Sim seemed to have been his charming self. Nobody spoke of the death threat letters or graffiti on the door or the source of the word 'pervert', as if it didn't exist, Anton chalking it up to the recent decriminalization of homosexuality in Russia, subsequent protesting riots, and Sim's theater having a reputation for employing gays, which of course didn't involve Pavlik in any way, who, after a short stay in the hospital, was discharged home, his face puffy, his ribs not broken, as it turned out, but merely bruised. Sim neither confirmed nor denied Anton's statement, listening with a smile half-hidden by a scarf. As he spoke, Anton kept giving Pavlik odd looks and was cold to Irka, ever since the night she showed up after being unable to stay and sleep at the theater. Pavlik and Irka were offered their room back, and Margarita grumpily migrated to Yulia and Anton's bedroom.

"I'm eighteen years old." Fumed Pavlik, standing up so fiercely, the dishes rattled on the table, set with finest

delicacies in the Boim's living room that doubled as a bedroom.

"I can make my own decisions." He added.

"Not while you're under my roof, you can't." Said Anton politely, shifting up his glasses.

"Then I'll go somewhere else." Countered Pavlik.

"And where exactly would that be, Pavlusha?" Said Anton, getting a trifle irritated.

Pavlik stared. "I'll rent an apartment." He said through teeth. "Please, don't make me repeat this, papa. You'll have to strap me down to hold me home. I'm going to act tomorrow because nobody can stop me from doing what I love doing. Not Russian National Unity, not mafia, not the president himself. I don't care what they do. Theater is my life, papa. Without it I don't want to live, okay? I hope I'm making myself clear." He shook as he said it, balling tablecloth up into his fists.

Sim smiled appreciatively, but kept quiet.

Irka touched his hand for support.

"Sure you do. But, Pavlusha, you just left the hospital. You've sustained extensive bruising on the upper part of your body, and your face. You must take time to heal. Must you be so adamant about going back to... to work?" Countered Anton.

"I thought that's what you taught me, papa, to never give up." Said Pavlik and slumped back into the chair, looking at his plate.

"Excuse me. May I... say something? I hate to interrupt, but..." Sim raised his hand, calling attention. "I think Pavlik doesn't mean anything derogatory by this, Anton Abramovich, nor does he mean to scare you, believe me. He's devoted to his craft, and I greatly admire that. As a matter of fact, performing again might be just what he needs right now, to get away from the... danger he is currently in. You see, we might be leaving soon—"

"Leaving?" Said Yulia, alarmed. "Where?"

"On tour, Yulechka, on a glorious tour." Said Sim charmingly, watching Anton to see if it was okay to call his wife by that nickname.

Anton pressed his lips together. "This is the first time I'm hearing about it."

Pavlik looked as puzzled as Irka, both of them ogling Sim, who inclined his head ever so slightly, and continued. "The Golden Ring. You know. Kostroma, Ivanovo, Suzdal."

"But, Sim, Pavlusha is in no state—" Began Anton.

"Papa, please. Am I to take it that nothing I said had in fact penetrated your iron logic? Listen to me. I said, I can make my own decisions. If I decide—"

"Where is your respect, young man?" Margarita croaked suddenly, shaking her head. "I don't recognize my own grandson. Since when do you interrupt your father? In my days you would've

given a hefty dose of lynching for that. When I think back on my days—

"Dear grandmother, I'm sorry if I have interrupted my father, but presently—aseferw"

"Pavlusha. Mama." Said Yulia warningly. "Enough."

"Why am I even bothering with this." Margarita threw up her hands.

"Mama—"

"Don't you *mama* me, this is serious matter we're talking about. Pavlusha's life is in jeopardy!" She croaked.

"You're forgetting something." Said Pavlik, controlling his seething, but not very successfully. "If I may remind you. You're all forgetting something."

"What is it we're forgetting, Pavlusha?" Inquired Anton.

"Irina, my future wife and the mother of my future child—" He put his hand on Irka's shoulder, and she thought that Yulia looked strangely at her, "—won't have any protection from this deal, will she? Who's to say she won't be attacked again?"

There was a momentary silence at the table, interrupted only by Margarita swirling the sugar into her tea and clinking the spoon on the china.

"I'll take care of that." Said Sim suddenly.

"What? You will?" Yulia looked at him with a weird expression on her face, a mix of disbelief and awe.

"Of course, my sweets." Boasted Sim. "She's my..." He halted, looking at Irka seriously. "...my actress. Pavlik is my actor. They're all like children to me, my children. I haven't... been blessed with the miracle of fatherhood. It's the least I can do."

Irka stared at Sim, unable to believe what she just heard.

He winked at her good-naturedly. "Assuming that... would that be okay with you, sugar bird?"

Irka closed her mouth, which hung open, and nodded slowly.

"Oh, Sim!" Said Yulia, standing up a little in her agitation. "That is... that is so..." She was looking for the right word. "Gallant." She giggled like a little girl, then quickly composed herself, horrified at the look Anton gave her.

"Well, that is..." He said, but didn't finish.

"That's how it's done! What a gentleman. Reminds me of my days." Said Margarita, tearing up.

Sim took up his flute and filled it with champagne, noisily standing up. "Let us drink to young love, for it to blossom into a beautiful thing, into art, into heavenly and intangible that can't be destroyed by those who hate. To love."

The clinking and drinking followed. Half of the table wasn't affected by this merriment, smiling with their lips but not with their eyes.

Irka studied Yulia, Yulia studied Pavlik, Pavlik studied Irka. Then they switched, glancing around at each other, pretending like they didn't. This weird dynamic kept happening all the way to Sim's departure (Irka hugged him fiercely, and he, chuckling, returned it with unsure arms) and consequent cleanup of the food and the dishes and the prepping for the night, with both Pavlik and Irka tired, Pavlik on pain meds, Irka exhausted from pregnancy and the need to run and pee almost every hour, which in the end prompted her to stop drinking tea altogether. Horrified and hoping it's nothing, she kept quiet about cramps in her lower abdomen that seized her up every couple hours.

When they were sitting on the bed, ready to converse, as Pavlik was dying to know more about Irka's escape from the hospital and the race on the roof of which she hinted but haven't had the time to explain in detail, there was a knock on their door and Yulia poked in her face, agitated.

"I'm not interrupting anything important, am I? Thought I'm not." She asked as she slunk in and quietly closed the door behind her, looking around.

"No, mama, you're not." Said Pavlik slowly. "But next time I'd prefer it if you waited to enter until one of us answers? Because, uh, what if we're, uh, not quite presentable?"

"I don't think that ever happens, does it?" She asked icily.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain in a minute." She composed herself, breathing hard and pressing palms into her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Said Pavlik, alert now.

Irka looked up at Yulia quizzically, who suddenly bit on her finger and convulsed in contorted silent sobbing, albeit hardly audible, but sobbing nonetheless.

"What is it, mama? You're scaring me." Said concerned Pavlik. "Can you please tell us what it is?"

Only then did Yulia wiped her face, glancing from one to another to Irka's belly to their faces again. She paused on Irka, piercing her with a glare that could burn, and suddenly Irka understood. They shared a bond, between a mother and a mother, a bond that couldn't be broken or overridden by cultural, societal, or familial rules.

Irka momentarily blushed. No, she outright burned, wanting to fall through the floor and break into dust.

"Mama, please, will you tell us what is going on?" Whispered Pavlik, his hands shaking.

Yulia didn't say a thing. She turned around, reached over the wardrobe and gave it to Pavlik. It was Irka's diary. "I was

cleaning the room, for your arrival, and..." She said apologetically.

"Mama, no, you didn't. How could you do something like this. This is my room. It's private!" Exclaimed Pavlik with horror and then sunk his head into hands.

"I didn't know what it was or whose it was, Pavlusha, it had no name it, nothing. How was I to know?" She countered. "And you're welcome."

"Thank you, mama, for cleaning my room." Said Pavlik through his hands.

An awkward pause stretched over them, and Irka wished with all her might to cease to exist somehow, just explode and be no more, like a water balloon thrown over the balcony.

"Is this true?" Yulia ventured quietly. "Just tell me, is it? I need to hear it from you."

"Is what true." Tried Pavlik.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Please, tell your mother, I think I deserve to know."

Pavlik looked at her for a long time, then at Irka, then at his mother again, and lowered his face into hands again.

"I'll take it as ayes. Am I to take it that you're not man enough to admit this to your own mother?" Hissed Yulia.

Pavlik looked up incredulously. "Yes, mama, I'm not man enough, I guess. I'm gay, okay? Are you happy now? What else do

you want me to say? I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay!" He slammed on the bed.

"Shhh!" Yulia looked around, panicked. "Your father will hear."

"What do you care?" Pavlik bounded to the window and pressed his forehead to it, thumping his fists.

Yulia let out a shuddering breath. "I understand that you're upset. I'm sorry this is hard for you to talk about, but it's hard for me too. Can you tell me, since when—"

"Third grade." Said Pavlik dully. "Oleg."

"Oh. That chubby boy." Yulia covered her mouth.

"He wasn't chubby, mama. He was..." Pavlik trailed off.

"He was what?"

"Oh, forget it." He walked over to Irka and thrown his body on the bed, leaning to her. She took his head in her hands, passing fingers through his hair.

"I always thought..." Yulia caught herself, strung like a rod and very uncomfortable, positively eating both Irka and Pavlik with her eyes. "I won't tell a soul, Pavlusha, don't worry. I'll certainly never tell papa. Of course, I don't..." She propped up her glasses. "I don't fully understand how it works, I mean, you and Irina, or why."

Pavlik only shook his head, "Not that you ever would."

Irka's heart skipped a beat.

"But if you love her so much..." Yulia began.

"Yes. I do." Said Pavlik, his face blank, as if his thoughts were far away.

"Well, I supposed. If you want to get married, get married." She hesitated. "Is it true that Kostik was—"

"Yes, and please, can we not mention his name." Said Pavlik, exasperated.

Irka reached and carefully retrieved her diary from Yulia's unresisting hand, leafing through it. It was all here, her conversations with Pavlik, his confessions about Kostik being the love of his life, her dreams and hopes and, Irka realized with horror, her own personal story, about her and Lyosha. She looked up at Yulia, who pressed her lips together and nodded, without saying anything. Yes, she knew, she knew who the father was, she understood why they were being attacked, she got it where Lyosha worked and for whom, and her dislike, her mistrust yielded to her motherly instinct of protection, softened by her infuriation of injustice done to another woman, but she still didn't trust Irka fully. Irka could tell. Still, she felt strangely relieved that Yulia knew her secret. At least she didn't know anything about Pavlik and Sim, or about them wanting to go to America. Irka hasn't written any of that.

As if reading her thoughts, Yulia said. "So, now that we know who the father is—by the way, Irina, it's horrible what

happened to you, truly horrible, I was crying when I read it, but—are you sure you didn't imagine it all? Is it maybe some sort of a story? It's hard to believe, after all. A grown man like that... Of course, he's alcoholic, that explains a lot."

Irka gazed at her sadly. Little did this woman know.

Yulia leaned to her. "Here is my advice to you. Forget it. Don't rock the boat, don't stir the past. The past is the past. You must look into the bright future, you must live into the future. So stop it. Stop writing these stories, it's not doing anyone any good." She straightened.

Irka opened her mouth, feeling small and wrong.

"Funny to hear you say it, mama. Is that how you solve your problems, by forgetting about them?"

"Since when are we talking about me?" She said.

"Fine. We won't. Let's talk about Irina. Do you understand the danger she is in now? Do you get it what that pervert want's to do to her? He wants to kill her!" Said Pavlik.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Yulia said. "Yes, of course, I understand. Pavlusha, can I ask you a question?"

"What?" Pavlik blurted, then corrected himself. "Sorry, mama, I'm tired and groggy and..."

"That's okay. I just want to know one more thing." She paused.

"Why not. Go ahead." Said Pavlik, dejected.

"You and... and Sim." She began.

"No." Pavlik rejected it fiercely. "He's with John, mama."

"Ah. I see." She said, not convinced. "So you never—"

"Never." Lied Pavlik, staring at her.

"All right. I was simply worried. That's all I needed to know. Well, I will leave you two alone. Good night." And abruptly she departed, leaving both Pavlik and Irka at a loss.

"I guess that was a bad idea, leaving your diary here." Finally said Pavlik.

Irka grasped her head.

"No, no, no! Irina, look at me. It's not your fault."

Irka peeked through fingers, cautiously.

"Not your fault, okay? It was bound to happen one way or another. Mama always suspected." Said Pavlik with a sigh.

Thank you, wrote Irka. Thank you for everything. She added, hesitantly, and then, when you leave, wherever it is you'll go, America or some other place, I hope you have a good life. I will never forget you and will always love you. Always and forever. She made sure Pavlik read what she wrote, then tore out the page, ripped it to pieces, stalked to the window, opened it and threw it out, watching the pieces scatter.

Chapter 48. The Proposal

How much time passed, Irka couldn't tell. She didn't dare turning, didn't dare looking or making any movement at all. She was afraid of Pavlik's reaction, afraid he'd tell her to take a hike. It was all her fault. Because of her ignorance and carelessness his secret got exposed to his mother, who was clearly not pleased about it. Irka's breath puffed on the glass, making foggy circles, and she drew in them, writing Pavlik's name over and over again. Then she felt his hand on her shoulder and still wouldn't turn, trembling.

"Irina, I..." Said Pavlik's voice, uncertain. "I just want you to know." He slowly turned her around, holding up her face. "I do love you." He shifted closer, so his nose touched hers.

She tried to pull away.

"Please. I do. I don't know how it works, it's different, it's not like... it doesn't have the same passion. But... it's love, it's real, I know it, I can feel it. It's like... like clouds love the sky, like spring and the flowers, like, I don't know... like you love warm wind on your face. Like that."

Irka pressed her lips, to hold herself together.

"You're beautiful, Irina Marinova, you know that?"

Irka blushed. She always thought herself ugly, her sizeable boobs and ass being the source of jokes at school, her mousy hair thin and limp. She energetically shook her head.

"Yes, you are." Insisted Pavlik. "Especially now. Remember that time you bumped into me? Cleaning the theater? I said, hey, where you're running so fast, and you didn't say anything?"

She nodded.

"I thought you were shy. Thought that's why you were quiet. You blushed then too, like now. There was something adorable about that. I don't know how to describe it. Goodness? You have a good heart. I love your heart, Irina, you taught me to be a better man."

Irka involuntarily raised a brow at that.

"Despite what my mother says." Flustered, Pavlik suddenly lowered himself on one knee, holding her hand. "Will you marry me?"

She stood motionless, thunderstruck. The whole talk about the wedding was a strictly formal affair, without any romanticism to it, it simply had to be done. She didn't expect anything, nothing at all, and now she got this and didn't know what to do about it, wishing to dip her head in snow because it was about to explode from heat.

"Oh, this is not right. Hold on." Pavlik looked about, but there was nothing he could use. He rummaged about in the

wardrobe, on the table, desperately turning up pillows and looking there. Finally, coming out of stupor, Irka grabbed her backpack that Sim brought with him, produced the velvet box and handed it to Pavlik.

"No, no, I can't use that. I have to give you my own. Here. May I?" He lifted Irka's diary. She shrugged.

Pavlik tore out a page, and began writing on it, finally showing it to her. He covered it with *I love you I love you I love you* on repeat, so it all blurred into one solid mass of letters. When he was done, he rolled the paper into a band and fashioned it so its ends folded and held together, making a thick papery ring out of it.

"Irina Marinova." He began, tentatively, holding it out. "Will you marry me?"

Irka's lips formed *da* on their own accord. Her heart wanted to explode while Pavlik put the paper ring on her finger, standing up and kissing her.

"Would that do, you think? Was that okay? I'll buy you a proper ring, a beautiful one, but for now..."

Irka nodded, happy.

After this they talked deep into the night, Irka mostly listening, only occasionally writing something down, and constantly fingering the band.

Pavlik cracked open the window. "Yeah, I started smoking, sorry." He said, lighting a cigarette and puffing out, careful not to leave a trace of ash on the windowsill. "This guy in the hospital. Dimon. He said it'll calm my nerves, so I tried and, you know..." He looked at it like at a foreign object. "It does calm you down, actually." He paused, growing somber. "I'd be lying if I told you I'm not scared, Irina. I am. I'm terrified out of my mind. The hate in their eyes." He licked his lips and took another drag, holding the cigarette carefully between fingertips, like a girl. "It was poison. It poisoned me, with fear."

Irka listened, silent.

"Now you know." He added, watching the snow falling.

Irka inclined her head, uncertain.

"Now you know what my life is like." Explained Pavlik.

"What it feels like. Did you see? Did you feel it? The hostility? No, more than that. It was like a wish to murder, to make me extinct. They hate me with this primal hate that animals don't have, they think I've been born defected, that's what they think. They think my offspring is defected too. Somehow they got this idea in their heads that homosexuality is a genetic parasite, a disease. They'll have no qualms about killing you off, thinking they're doing good for humanity, you know, good

for this pathetic country. Fuck Russia." He flicked the cigarette out.

Irka flinched. Pavlik hasn't cursed before, always so polite, so well-mannered. He changed, since he came back from the hospital. There was certain bitterness about him, bitterness and disappointment about everything, like a layer of gauze stuck to his skin.

"I want out of here." He said harshly. "There is no life for me here, you see? Only constant humiliation, shame, and guilt, over being who I am. I'm riddled with paranoia now, constantly looking around, to see if anyone follows me, if anyone has figured me out. Sim says, be proud. How in hell can I be proud when I can be killed for it? Tell me, how?"

Irka shrugged, at a loss, wanting to reach out and comfort him and being afraid. He looked wild, wild and venomous, as if he'd sting her badly in case she touched him.

"They were not professionals, by the way. From what you told me. The guys that chased you. I think it would be a good idea to destroy those pages, in case, you know..." He crossed the room, pacing it.

Irka dutifully tore out the pages she has written on about her hospital escape, the roof chase, and the encounter with Denis and Natasha, tearing them to pieces.

"I can't believe it. Konkin." Pavlik shook his head. "The chameleon bastard. Although, on the other hand, it's something he would do. It's in his character. I always felt a whiff of something foul coming off of him, like he wanted to squish me like a cockroach but was hiding it very well." He walked up to Irka. "Philosophically speaking, I should continue making art, continue performing, in their faces, keep going, but... I know what I said at dinner, don't look at me like that, I do, I want to, but... It's so hard! I mean, all I want to do is just run away and live somewhere where I can freely walk, hold hands together, fuck, kiss, whatever, anything I want, okay? Where John and I can—" He broke off.

Irka lowered her gaze.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. It slipped out. It... I... Ah, I don't know what I'm saying anymore, forget it. Let's just go to sleep." He walked to bed, grabbed at his hair, turned around and walked up to Irka again.

She stood like a statue, ignoring her need to go pee, to sit down to relieve her cramps, hardly feeling anything.

"I feel bad for saying this, I feel so guilty." He held her shoulders. "I feel bad for leaving you here all alone, with the baby, but what can I do, Irina? What can I do?"

He studied her eyes.

She looked at him and through him at the same time, like an inanimate doll.

"What do you want me to do?" He pleaded.

At last, Irka shrugged. She has been abandoned many times. She was the one who got herself into this precarious situation, knowing Pavlik would never be hers, knowing he'd leave her eventually. She let Lyosha reign power over her for so many years. Hell, if it came to that, it was her who stopped talking in the first place, so who could she be blamed for this now? Nobody. Nobody except herself. There wasn't anyone out there who'd stand up for her, she could only trust in her own ass. It had carried her through this much, certainly it would carry her through the years ahead. And if it didn't, well, she'd have to deal with the consequences.

I guess, this is what's called life, thought Irka, watching Pavlik's pupils widen in the darkness of the room, feeling his hands tremble on her shoulders, his whole body shiver. He needed help, the love of her life needed help, she could wait.

She gingerly placed her palms on his bruised face, holding it like this for a minute, then pointed to bed. Life had to go on, they had to keep functioning, to keep living it. They had to sleep, to be able to deal with whatever life threw at them in the morning, and Pavlik understood it without words.

"You're like a rock, Irina. Don't you think? I mean, like a solid rock. How do you do this, I wonder."

Irka shrugged.

"You amaze me. I wish I had your strength."

She squeezed his hand and smiled. *I'm here for you, for as long as you'll have me. I'm your rock.*

That night they slept naked, without Pavlik's usual pajamas and Irka's nightgown, spooning, Pavlik falling asleep instantly, drugged up to his ears, and Irka staying awake into the night, staring at the ceiling, twirling the ring on her finger, wanting to constantly touch it and afraid at the same time, lest she frayed the paper. Pavlik's proposal was the most romantic thing that happened to her, and she replayed in her head over and over, until her eyelids grew tired and slowly she drifted off as well.

Chapter 49. The Apartment Sale

The next day all of them, Margarita, Yulia, Anton, Pavlik and Irka, took Moscow metro and endured an almost two hour long travel across the city to the dreaded apartment to conclude the deal, which was orchestrated alarmingly fast. Not many people sold their apartments in that neighborhood for such a low price, but they had to do it quickly, in order for Anton to meet the terms of the negotiations which he didn't disclose to anyone, spending most of the morning on the phone in his study and then rounding up everyone and rushing them out, claiming they were late and they simply couldn't be late, afraid the deal might fall through at the last minute.

Originally they were going to leave Irka home, but she refused to let go of Pavlik, employing her iron grip. Whatever days she had left to spend with him, she was determined to count every hour. Pavlik had to be present on the deal as clever Boims have already singed the apartment to his name, making sure Margarita and him both got new stamps in their passports in the local *militsiya* offices, their new *propiskas*, *propiska* being the curious Soviet residency permit and migration recording tool in one, giving a person the right to reside in a certain place. It

was prohibited to reside anywhere but at the place of your *propiska*, and it was impossible to get it unless you actually lived there and could prove it with documents. Or, of course, you could always bribe your way to get it.

Since Moscow was a coveted place to live for anyone in Russia, especially in the hunger years when the country received food by coupons, other city dwellers hated the capital, the city where the government sat, the city that always had food while others had to gulp at empty shelves in the stores, the city where one could always find work. Desperate to get in, people went as far as faking marriages just to acquire that *propiska* stamp in their passports. Irka's theory was that Lyosha's intent was to get her mother to marry him, to get himself the inscription and to eventually coax her into signing the apartment to him. It often crossed her mind that in this case, he could bribe officials to go as far as canceling her *propiska*, which in effect would leave her homeless.

After a short squabble on whether to succumb to hiring a *chastnik* instead of a taxi to score a cheap ride, as Anton hasn't bought a new car yet and was still mourning over the loss of his old one, they set off walking toward the subway, Margarita grumbling about the state of affairs in the country and Yulia mentioning that it would be better for her to keep quiet during the deal, her being disruptive, to which Margarita

scoffed that she wasn't dying yet and it was her apartment they were selling and had was entitled to have an opinion on it, they trudged down the stairs, stuffed themselves into the overcrowded escalator and descended into warm smelly metro tunnel. Irka moved about with everyone automatically, trying not to pay attention to increasing pain exploding in her abdomen like fireworks and the baby being restless. She put on the most impenetrable mask of indifference she could muster and still Pavlik kept throwing her worried glances, sensing something was wrong but afraid to ask, knowing she wanted to come with them.

By the time they made it, Irka was bursting.

Thankfully, the buyer was late.

Standing by the door, appalled at what they faced, the women of the family quickly mobilized themselves to action. All except Irka, who was sent to rest inside, which she did, relieving herself in the bathroom. It took Yulia and Margarita, who both fiercely opposed to Anton and Pavlik getting involved, a good twenty minutes to clean the door of the apartment, covered with dried up eggs and, what smelled like, smeared on excrement at least a week old. They couldn't clear up the graffiti, but by the time there was a bell ring and Anton, smoothing his suit and propping up his glasses, stood up to let the buyer in, it looked and smelled presentable, although both Yulia and Margarita were flustered from effort.

"Zdravstvuyte." Said a groomed man in his thirties, his budding stomach propped on thin legs and wrapped in an expensive sheepskin coat. He had a no nonsense air about him, moving around jerkily yet without doubt, two scary strong looking men behind him, who silently positioned themselves by the door, crossing hands on front of them.

"Hello, hello. Good day." Said Anton nervously, almost dancing, constantly propping up his glasses, one minute putting his hands in his pocket, another taking them out. "Anton Abramovich, very nice to meet you in person finally, uh, what would be your name again?" He stood like an idiot, with an outstretched hand and a waiting smile, while the buyer simply studied him, not an expression passing his shiny face. After what felt like an eternity, Anton lowered his hand.

Irka and Pavlik exchanged a glance.

Yulia clasped her hands together, a strained smile plastered over her face. Margarita patted her on the back and it seemed like another pat, and Yulia would bite her hand off.

"I prefer not to mention any names. Don't see how this is relevant to our business." Said the man flatly in a dry measured voice.

"Of course, of course. I understand. Let's not bother. After all, we don't need names for this, do we?" Anton emitted a weak chuckle. "Well, here we are then." He rubbed his hands.

"Here it is." He waved about, trying too hard. "One bedroom, one kitchen. Kept very well, you can see, clean and ready to go. We'd just have to move out the furniture. Would you like to take a look around?"

The buyer wasn't listening. He snapped his fingers. One of the guards brought him a leather briefcase, and he positioned his hands on the locks. Waiting.

"No need to fuss. How much?" He asked.

"Oh, well, like we agreed on the phone." Said Anton, licking his lips. Irka could see a fine layer of sweat forming on his forehead, although it was relatively cool in the apartment after they aired it out for twenty minutes, trying to get rid of the stink.

"I need a number." Said the man calmly.

"Twenty thousand." Said Anton, visibly uncomfortable now because both guards silently materialized next to the buyer, guarding him and his dough.

"Ten." Said the buyer.

Irka's stomach churned. She looked at Pavlik, who fixed his gaze on his father, unblinking.

"What? Excuse me, but..." Anton stammered.

"Well, pardon me!" Exclaimed Margarita, standing up. "I won't allow my grandson to be ripped off, this is not why I have moved across town. What is this? Do you mean to say, a man's

word means nothing nowadays?" She glared, waiting for some kind of an answer, clutching her purse.

Yulia was so tense, Irka could feel waves of contempt coming off her. "Mama, please sit down, you will tire yourself out. Let men deal with the business."

"Yulechka. How forgetful of you. Who is here over seventy, I'd like to know? And you claim I have bad memory? I thought I told you not to *mama* me." Margarita would've continued, but Anton gave her a stare of such ferocity, she sat back down.

Thick silence spread over the room, the ominous kind.

"I know what I said." Said the buyer slowly, with a pained look on his face. "I changed my mind. The apartment is different from the way you described it, hence the price change. Besides. You're making it. Difficult. I do have pressing business somewhere else. I don't have much time. Please, hurry up with your decision."

"Twenty. We need at least twenty." Said Anton, desperate.

Both Pavlik and Irka held hands. This wasn't going too well, it wasn't going too well at all. They bargained to the point of Anton agreeing to fifteen thousand, then finally settled on eleven, almost half the price they originally agreed on.

Without another word, the buyer clicked his case open and took out eleven packs of fresh crisp dollars, tied together with rubber bands, and, counting them, stacked them on the table.

Anton, defeated, made to stand up and sat back down at the raised hand of one of the guards. He had a walkie-talkie, and it buzzed. He walked out of the apartment. They could hear him rattling something off.

The buyer held his hand on the money and sat, waiting.

Nobody moved, nobody spoke.

Boims and Irka knew there were in the presence of either a member of Moscow mafia or one of the new Russians who made a fortune on the wave of Soviet Union's economical collapse, milking hyperinflation by turning around foreign currency or by buying and selling real estate, mostly in the notoriously expensive downtown neighborhoods, but occasionally in one of the older Soviet-era apartment buildings, if they were built well, getting away with ridiculous profits, doing their business under the table, dealing with, literally, bags of cash, and leaving people homeless. Money was simply printed in Russia at the time by the government, to finance its debt, leaving the majority of population below the level of poverty and the select few ultra rich.

The guard came back and whispered something in the buyer's ear. His facial expression changed from dull to sinister, and he

ogled them, pausing on Pavlik slightly longer than on others. The guard retreated to the door.

"With the furniture." Said the buyer, and pushed the money Anton's way.

"With... the furniture?" Asked Anton, uncomprehending.

"This is outrageous!" Exclaimed Margarita, attempting to stand up and restricted by Yulia, whispering in her ear. "My wardrobe." Tried Margarita. "My armoire, my... they're antique pieces. I could get a good price for my armoire, it's worth—"

"It's trash, trust me." Said the buyer calmly. "I simply have a change of plans. Your last word?" he glanced at Anton, then at his wristwatch, expensive by the look of it, and stood up, as if ready to leave.

"All right, all right. With the furniture." Anton said, composing himself to sound not too desperate, and failing.

"Horosho. Good doing business with you." The buyer produced a pack of documents, which was signed silently by Anton and Pavlik. They were handed a copy, and the buyer interlaced his hands, cracking the knuckles. This entire time his face remained impassionate, but now color crept into it, strangely making him look not better but worse.

"Don't you need the keys?" Said Yulia.

"We'll be installing a new door, so no, but thank you. I do need you to vacate the premises, please."

"Do you mind?" Asked Anton, and began unrolling rubber bands from each stack of bills, counting and recounting them by hand.

The buyer said nothing, watching him with amusement. Finally done, scooping up the money, Anton opened up his messenger bag and stuffed it inside, all of them slowly departing, Margarita especially. She traced the furniture, as if trying to find a speck of dust on it, and her chin shook.

The door shut behind them, and they could hear sharp commands issuing from behind it, then dialing of the phone and talking.

Irka pushed the elevator button. They stood on the landing, waiting, completely lost.

"Not enough. Not enough. It's not enough." Anton kept repeating.

"Antosha, don't worry. We'll figure something out." Said Yulia soothingly.

"That was a rip-off." Said Pavlik suddenly, his nostrils flaring. "You totally let him rip you off, papa. You—"

"Silence!" Anton yelled, the bag shaking on his hands. "I'm doing this for you. All of this. Everything. How dare you chastise me. How dare you." His voice grew dark, he was glaring.

"Papa, I'm sorry, it's not what I meant to say." Pavlik retreated, while Irka grew hot, folding her hands into fists, ready to defend him.

"Then what did you mean, huh? I'd like to hear it. What did you mean son? What does all of this mean?" He gestured to graffiti. "Perhaps you do have an explanation for me, contrary to what your mother says? Perhaps these people do?" He turned and lurched at the opposite door, ringing the bell.

"Anton! Stop! You're out of your mind!" Yulia caught his hand, and they struggled.

When Pavlik moved in to separate them, Margarita touched his arm. "Never get between two squabbling lovers, you'll get your head bitten off."

Irka stared at the door, feeling Svetka's eye in the peephole, sensing her breathing, and knowing that she won't open it. If Svetka did, she'd pummel her into pulp, if only for the reason that she was weak, that she worked for those bastards, hating them, and still doing what they told her.

The elevator arrived, creaking, and the door to Margarita's apartment opened, with the bulk of one of the guards surfacing in the crack. He said nothing, only looked, and all of them filed into the elevator without another word and pushed the button, watching the doors creep toward each other.

Chapter 50. The Deadline

After the sale fiasco Anton visibly got older, shrunk, his eyes lost shine. Yulia soothed him and gave a lecture to Irka and Pavlik every night, and Margarita occupied herself with the idea that they needed to file a complaint with *militsiya* who would sort everything out, like they did in her days, putting them hooligans to the gun. Pavlik managed to get the information out of his mother that the cost of his head stood indeed at twenty thousand dollars and had to be delivered in cash to the apartment across Margarita's, where Roma was murdered, by the end of the week. While Anton called every single one of his business acquaintances, trying to sell jewelry or borrow money, Pavlik and Irka decided to take the matter into their own hands.

In their absence Sim replaced them with doubles, Irka's part played by an actress with a pillow stuffed under her costume, and so The Raven continued its march, in spite of almost daily protests, garnering the play an even wider interest, with tickets sold out for every show and press increasingly speculating on the nonappearance of its two rising stars. Based on its success, Sim went ahead with his touring plans and announced to Boims that he thought it would be a good

diversion to take both Pavlik and Irka out of Moscow, to hop from one city to another, while the adults figured things out, which infuriated Pavlik, made him terrified for his father and desperate to deal with this himself. He was ashamed to admit to their defeat, ashamed to ask Sim for one more favor, to ask for money. Irka shared his sentiment, but without much enthusiasm.

Lately she hasn't been feeling well, often tired and bloated and cringing at constant spasms, trying to spend as much time as she could in horizontal position, explaining to Pavlik that it's what all pregnant women did. It was that easy to fool him. Her high pain tolerance helped her ignore the discomfort most of the time, and she happily brainstormed with him on how to make the remaining ten thousand dollars, patiently listening to his naïve ideas from buying currency and selling it to outright dealing with drugs, while she quietly decided to engage in what she knew how to do best. Steal.

For the rest of the week, despite Boim's protests, every day they made it out of the house, taking the subway to get to the theater, to plan for traveling together with the rest of the troupe, and to try and make some dough. Pavlik left Irka alone often, for private talks, as he called it, with fellow actors, to seek out business opportunities, and Irka, after enduring mandatory tea chats with Ilinichna, used the set of keys she had left back from her janitorial days to pay visits to dressing

rooms and to take what she could and what she thought was of value, jewelry primarily, until actors started complaining that there must have been a thief in the theater as things started disappearing and Sim sat both Pavlik and Irka down, asking what the deal was.

"Nothing." Was Pavlik's default answer to his every question, and Irka shrugged, increasingly wary of her pain and worried about Pavlik's prominent bruising, neither of them telling Sim about the failure of the apartment sale, acting cheery. On the outside. On the inside they were being eaten by constant paranoia, checking people and cars around them every minute, waiting for it to be light out before leaving the building and coming back home before it was dark.

Whatever Irka stole, she gathered in a kerchief and one night knocked on Anton's study door, where he lately took on sleeping as it was impossibly tight for all three of them to squeeze into one room. He unfolded an armchair into a daybed of sorts and camped on it under a blanket.

"What is it?" He said grubbily, rubbing his eyes and putting on his glasses. Pavlik was talking on the phone, happy that the line was open at last after Anton kept it busy all day, trying to conduct business.

Irka was about to offer her mother's ring then halted, hesitating, thinking somehow she would hurt Sim if she did,

because Anton would for ask her where she got it, guess, and get pissed. He got pissed nonetheless, looking at an array of necklaces and earrings she offered.

"What's this?" He said sternly. "Why are you giving me this? Where did you get it?"

Irka stool bolted to the floor, heat rising in her face. She motioned to the corridor, where Pavlik's voice droned on in the background, intermingled with TV sounds coming from the living room.

"You want to help Pavlusha out? You think these are worth good money? You stole them, didn't you?"

Irka didn't dare breathing.

"Irina, I want you to listen to me and remember, so I don't have to repeat myself. You're about to become part of the Boim family. In this family we don't steal things, I thought we talked about this before. Let me stress it again, to get through your thick stubborn skull. We do not steal. Do you understand?"

Irka nodded.

"Now, I want you to give these back to people you took it from. Please. And do not bother me again with this." He clicked the door shut.

Defeated, Irka rolled up her possessions into the cloth and stuffed them into her backpack, with no intention of giving them back to their owners, but thinking where and to whom else she

could sell it, before Sunday night, the night they had to deliver the money. Only one person came to mind. She could ask Sim.

She didn't get a chance.

Sim called the following morning, which was Saturday, informing them that they departed tonight, from the main train station, and since then Boim's apartment hummed with activity, traveling preparation injecting some kind of a new energy into everyone, with Margarita cooking despite Yulia's protests, Yulia cleaning despite Anton's protests, Anton shoving money into Pavlik's hands despite his protests, and Pavlik subsequently giving part of the cash to Irka, as much as she tried to push his hand away, waving him off, sipping water from a glass, pulverizing it through pressed lips to moisten his shirts and pants, ironing them, enjoying watching the iron hiss when it touched a wet spot, feeling in her element.

Nobody spoke of it, but they were all strung up, thinking about the upcoming deadline the next night and lack of money, Anton and Yulia squabbling and Pavlik attempting to silence them both, only to be interrupted by Margarita.

"I'll go." She said with finality that didn't leave the possibility of being challenged. "What will they do to an old woman? I'll say, here is half, another half is coming."

"Through my dead body, mama." Hissed Yulia.

"The dead body would be mine. You deserve to live, I've lived my life already." She scoffed.

"You see what she is doing to me?" Complained Yulia to Anton and to everybody else at the same time. "And she doesn't understand it either, that's the problem."

"What is that I don't understand?"

The phone rang, and Anton rushed to it as if somebody scalded him with boiling water. They all watched his face change from gloom to exhilaration, the corners of his lips rising and rising, while he listened.

"We have it!" He cried out suddenly, slamming down the receiver, taking off his glasses off. "We have the money! Pavlusha!"

"Papa, really?" Pavlik just stood there, shaking.

"Who?" Asked Yulia.

"Sim Novy. He'll let us borrow ten thousand from his own personal funds. Until you kids are back, from the tour. Oh, what a wonderful wonderful man." Anton's face fell. "We are indebted to him for the help he has given us. He has done so much for you, Pavlusha, I hope you have the decency to show him your respect and pay back with exceptional performance. Whatever Sim asks of you, you must do, do you catch what I'm trying to say? This is what doing good business means, son. This is what will

help you build relationships that last throughout your lifetime."

Irka recoiled at this idea, thinking about Lyosha, about the baby in her belly. *That is definitely one lasting relationship I have managed to procure*, she thought.

Pavlik seemed to have the same reaction, sharing a look of disdain with her. "Sim? How does he know? Did you tell him, papa?"

"Of course. I told him, I had to. He called and asked, said you've been acting strange lately. Asked if everything was okay. He worries about you, Pavlusha, he wants you to feel good, to perform well. He thought—"

"Papa, please. I requested you not to." Pavlik's voice caught at the end.

"Why? Why not? What's the fuss? I don't understand. Keep in mind, son. Technically, he is your boss and you are his employee, he deserves to know, especially if your presentation, on stage, I mean, depends on your personal happiness. It's imperative he takes an almost intimate participation in your personal life."

"Exactly." Said Pavlik, shaking his head.

In the middle of all this, of the first happy moment in days, albeit tainted slightly by the argument, the door bell rung.

"Who could that be?" Said Anton, startled.

"Are you expecting someone?" Said Yulia.

"Not that I recall. You?"

"No. Pavlusha, one of your friends maybe?" Said Yulia.

"No, mama. Nobody would come visit me right now, they're all packing."

"That's strange." Said Yulia, walking to the door.

"Please, Yulechka, allow me." Anton moved her aside.

The doorbell rang again, insistent.

Chapter 51. The Confession

In the open doorway stood Marina Marinova, unsteady on her legs, dressed it looked like in a hurry, leaning on the wall, hangover breath surrounding her like a cloud. From shock neither Anton nor Yulia could say anything for a few seconds, which Marina took for a welcome and stepped between them, inviting herself in and unceremoniously beginning to undress, when she noticed her daughter.

"Irkadura!" She exclaimed and rushed to her, hugging her and grabbing her cheeks, smooching them with wet slapping sounds.

Irka endured it, stiff as a rod.

"Well. Excuse me. That was quite, uh, how to say it, unexpected. Marina Petrovna, if I'm correct?" Said Anton finally, closing the door.

"Marina. How very nice to see you. To what do we owe the pleasure?" Added Yulia, smiling sweetly and crossing her arms.

"Who is this?" Demanded Margarita, trotting out of the kitchen. "Oh, Irina, would this be your mother?"

Irka wished for her feet turn into hot coals and burn a hole in the floor, large enough for both her and her mother to

fall through. She was embarrassed by her behavior, her demeanor, her slurry speech, unwashed crumpled badly put together look, cheap clothes, bad alcohol breath, and by her hanging on her, clinging to her like she was a buoy in the middle of turbulent waters.

Before anyone could say anything else, Marina let go of Irka and launched on Yulia, balancing herself by holding onto her shoulders and beginning to wail. "Save my daughter! Save her! You have to save her! You have to save her... you have to. I beg you. You hear me? I beg you!" She hiccupped and commenced to sobbing into Yulia's cardigan, her hands slipping down her sleeves, Yulia, horrified, standing there and gazing around, at her husband, then at her mother, then at Irka with questioning eyes as if asking what she was supposed to do with this woman.

"Let's all go into the kitchen and have tea. How about it?" Anton broke the awkwardness and ushered everyone inside, pulling out chairs. It was as if the reverse of Irka's visit back home, only it couldn't be possibly more opposite.

The kitchen was clean and neat and stoked with tastefully arranged dishes, a pot with soup on the stove, Margarita's cookies baking in the oven, a nice tea set on the table, complete with a special silver spoon for sugar, lose sugar, or, if anyone so desired, sugar in cubes, stacked neatly on a little saucer.

Everyone was polite, reserved, and, held together, especially Margarita trained in this and only letting loose when she was among her family members.

"Marina?" Said Yulia, looking into her puffy face. "Tea, perhaps?"

Marina blinked. "Beer? I want beer." And with that, without asking, she heaved herself up and stomped to the fridge, studying its contents. "No beer? I suppose tea would do. What do you folks drink, liquor? Like proper aristocrats?" She kicked up her head and issued a laugh that made Irka's bones brittle. She sat on the edge of the chair, strung by anticipation, knowing what was coming and mentally preparing herself for it.

In fact, it seemed as though Anton was the only one in the family still left in the dark about Lyosha's role in the whole affair, as Yulia has confided in Margarita on her insistence, and the old woman eyed Marina with a mixture of appreciation for her motherly instinct and disgust for the way she conducted herself.

Marina slumped back in the chair. "He will kill her, the swine. Take her away, take both of them away, before it's too late. He told me this morning. Oh, my baby, my baby." She reached for Irka and sniffled.

"Who?" Asked Anton. "Please explain. I'm afraid I'm rather confused. Who will kill who?"

"Lyosha, *blyad*, Lyosha! Open your eyes, didn't you see the rogue that he is? Fooled you, didn't he? Got a job, got himself a paycheck." Marina imitated Lyosha's puffed out chest. "Evil things they do, those Russian National Union lads or what they are called, I forget. Evil." She covered her face and sniffled into both hands, her favorite way of getting attention, Irka knew.

"So that's what it was. Security job." Anton looked around the kitchen.

"Tea?" Yulia raised the pot.

"Did you know this, Yulechka?" He asked quietly.

"Did I know what?" Yulia poured tea then added hot water and offered Anton a cube of sugar.

"About the death threats?"

"Mama, papa, please. Not now?" Asked Pavlik.

"They weren't meant for Irina, were they?" Asked Anton, infuriated at being left out of what everyone else knew already.

"What death threats?" Asked Margarita. "This is the first time I'm hearing about death threats."

It was Marina's turn to wonder. "He sent you death threats? The pig." She gulped tea and yelled out, scalding her lips.

"May I have a word?" Pavlik stood, causing them to pause and gape at him, waiting, Marina including, her mouth wide open in admiration. Pavlik did look good, stately, and she kept

winking at Irka, as if commending her on a good choice. Irka made sure to not move single facial muscle.

"Said he'd kill her and her prick." Marina was on a roll, blowing on her tongue in between words, to cool the burn. "Raved all morning, before he left. I left right after him, I tell you, right after him, to let you know. I couldn't come earlier, couldn't call either. I had to see my baby, to make sure she's all right." Marina blew on her tea, tasted it, and, satisfied, slurped it.

Irka winced.

"There was something you wanted to tell us?" Anton prompted Pavlik, who stood still, hands interlaced.

"It's my fault, papa." He said quietly.

"Your fault for what? I'm not sure I understand. What did you do?" Said Anton, peering through his glasses.

"He hates them, the low swine that he is, hates them Jews, oy, and them, those, what are they called again, the—" Marina choked on her last word, crying out. Irka stomped on her foot under the table, hard, with a scary look on her face. Marina almost blurted out what was not hers to share, and for the life of her Irka wouldn't be the cause of spilling Pavlik's secret again, not until he was ready to say it.

Pavlik looked down at Irka. She grabbed his hand, terrified. She could feel he was on the verge. There was no other way around it but through it.

Pavlik coughed politely. "I'm sorry, papa, I'm—"

Irka couldn't hold herself down anymore. She jumped up and covered Pavlik's mouth with her hand. Pavlik gently peeled it off. "It's okay. Please. Sit down."

"Go on." Said Marina interestedly, finishing her tea and pouring herself more, ladling spoon after spoon of sugar.

Yulia let out a shuddering breath, under a puzzled stare from Margarita. Anton ogled the women, puzzled, patiently waiting. You could slice the air in the kitchen with a knife, it was that thick.

"You see, papa, I meant to tell you this for a long time. I just... I'd start and then I'd lose the courage. It's very difficult for me to admit this. It's... I..." He fell silent, fumbling with the edge of the tablecloth.

"Pavlusha?" Said Anton, uncertain. "Would you like to maybe talk in private? We could go into my study."

"No, papa, I've had enough of hiding. I need to learn to... learn to... to face it in the open." His voice skipped.

Irka shook together with Pavlik, holding on to his hand for dear life, imagining her own life falling apart after this.

"Face what?" Anton said cautiously.

Another pause stretched, interrupted only by Marina's sugar crunching. She found the cubes and was chewing them one by one.

"Papa?" Said Pavlik at last, taking a deep breath. "I'm gay." Air rushed out of him. He dropped into the chair and covered his face.

"What?" Said Anton, looking around the kitchen.

"Them!" Said Marina, gloating. "It's them they kill, the gays. Our nation's disease, virus from the West, that's what he called them. Fucking instigator. He doesn't care who he kills, if you want to know my opinion, they're all pigs to him. He tells me he can gut one in a single swipe." She nodded to herself, not fully registering the meaning of what just happened.

"You... Pavlusha, you *what*?" Said Anton again. "Wait a second... I don't believe it. It's impossible. It's... not in our family. Never."

Strangely, Margarita watched all of this silently, being the first who walked up to Pavlik and patted him on the shoulder, Irka's hands already entwined around him.

"Yes, papa, I am, I *am*!" Pavlik screamed, his face red, veins on his neck strained and pulsing. "What am I now, not your son anymore? What do you mean, we don't have this in our family? Yes, we *do*. See me? Look at me! *Look* at me! I'm your son, and I'm gay, okay? I knew it since third grade, I tried talking to

you, but you wouldn't listen!" He rushed out of the kitchen, sending the chair flying, Irka on his heels, Yulia and Margarita after, leaving shocked Anton and Marina alone.

"Them gays can't make babies, can they?" Hiccuped Marina, looking at Anton. "Who is the father then?"

Anton couldn't move, his face grey, his mouth open in an inaudible scream.

Chapter 52. The Departure

Pavlik lay on the bed, curled up in a fetal position. Irka hugged him protectively, as much as her belly allowed, Yulia sat on the edge, her hand on his shoulder, Margarita stood to the side, shaking her head, and looking intermittently from her daughter to the window and back. This is how Anton found them after the initial shock passed and he made himself exit the kitchen, where, to keep her occupied and out of this delicate family matter, he left Marina with a bottle of imported vodka to her immense joy, the reason of her visit already forgotten.

He just stood there, studying Irka and her belly. She could hear gears clicking in his brain, working out the inevitable, looking up at him, inwardly saying goodbye to this home she grew accustomed to, to these people, to her dreams about the wedding dress and the car ride across Moscow and the kissing for the pictures and the wedding in a real nice restaurant and then the night in the honey moon suit Anton said he'd rent for the newly weds. Poof. Gone. Just like that. Just like all of it did her whole life. Only this time it hurt deeper, deeper than she ever imagined, and she couldn't hold her grief back, simply couldn't, letting tears roll down her face without making an effort to

wipe them, waiting for what would happen next, wondering if at least she could still perform while she moved back in with her mother, thinking of ways to protect herself from Lyosha's wrath and deciding to plead with Ilinichna to take her in. To plead with Sim. Plead with anyone, only not to go back.

Then she saw something, something glistening on Anton's face, under his glasses, trailing a timid line across the wrinkles.

He was crying.

They all were.

Yulia blinked tears away, licking off those that escaped. Margarita stood by the window, occasionally wiping her face. Pavlik quietly wept into bedding, and Irka couldn't hold hers back. Hopelessness rushed out of her, flooding her. She heard the bottle clinking from the kitchen and it made her whole face contort like that of a toddler, like before an eruption of a scream, in pain, but not audible yet. And so it stayed. Irka couldn't produce a sound, it got stuck in her throat and she only grunted, watching Anton carefully making his way into the room and sitting down next to his son, causing him to flinch.

"Pavlusha, our beloved Pavlusha." He said quietly. "I owe you an apology, son. It's very hard for me to admit as well, but... I believe I always knew. I simply chose to ignore it, victim of my own arrogance and... I don't what else. Perhaps my

upbringing, the stigma associated with it. Perhaps..." He trailed off, searching for a word and not finding it.

Heavy footsteps announced Marina's arrival. She grabbed on to the doorway sides, leaning in, already drunk, an empty bottle in her hand, staring at her daughter with that familiar loathing that came right before a beating. The change was unrecognizable. Within minutes alcohol transformed her from a hysterical bipolar woman to a monster.

Irka stared at the bottle. *She drank all of? All of it?*

"Gay, huh?" Marina slurred. "That husband of yours." She waved the bottle, it slipped her fingers and rolled on the floor.

Yulia threw a warning look at Anton.

Anton's jaw worked silently.

"Figures." Marina continued, flopping her head. "Knew you had shit for choice. First man, and you pick up scum. If he can't get his dick up to fuck a girl, then who's the father?" She swayed.

Irka solidified into one high-strung nerve. The orange. The color orange. It danced in front of her eyes. The curtain, the swinging threads of the curtain.

"I'll show you, you whore. Who is the father? Answer me!"

Irka's heart jumped to her throat. Without a second's hesitation, she sprung to her feet and ran at her mother,

pushing her aside, hearing her thump to the floor, skidding along the corridor, hastily stepping into her boots, grabbing the coat from the rack and running out, shutting the door behind her. She didn't know where she'd go, she simply had to get out and run, run somewhere, anywhere, where she couldn't see that face, couldn't hear that voice.

People looked at her strange as she darted out of the little maze of alleyways, on trodden paths in the dirty snow that started melting, by parked cars, skipping forward, only she couldn't make much distance. Her belly tugged and seized her in a spasm.

Panting, Irka leaned on the nearest tree, holding on to it, hugging her bulk, heaving, watching her breath curl up in the afternoon air.

This is how Pavlik found her, clutching the tree, her fingers white from the effort, frozen into claws.

"Oh God. Irina! There you are. You scared me to death. Come on." He tugged on her sleeve, his eyes red from crying.

Irka studied him questioningly.

"She's sleeping." He said.

That finally got her moving.

Still, Irka refused to get inside the apartment, and it's only on the insistence of her bladder that she obliged, darted in, dropped off her boots, hid in the bathroom, peed, splashed

her face with cold water, then slipped into their room, skirting the bulk of her mother on the floor trying not see it, flung on her backpack, and, back in the boots and by the door she stood, in an effort to avoid questions from Yulia and Anton, who discussed something in his study and were just walking out.

Irka pressed herself into the wall on the landing, fingering the paper ring, hearing her mother's snores coming from the hallway, until she heard voices coming. She skipped a few stairs down. Pavlik insisted on justifying her reaction by fear of her abusive mother, Yulia said it wasn't good for pregnant women to worry and that they could somehow figure it all out later, the father issue, the wedding, everything, but Anton wouldn't have any of it, shifting them aside and slapping his slippers on the cement floor.

"Irina, please, if you many. Come here a minute." He motioned, his face set.

Irka felt the worst nightmare of her life wasn't over yet, it was perhaps about to start. She didn't move.

"Irina, we need to talk. I don't want to talk out here. The neighbors, you understand. Besides, it's rather chilly. Please, come inside." Anton grew impatient, his brows knitting.

Irka took one tentative step, then another, and then, without a warning, Anton hissed right in her face, so that neither Pavlik nor Yulia could hear him, both arguing by the

door. "I want you out of my son's life." He looked scary, the way an animal looks defending his pack.

Irka withdrew, feeling for a step behind her to retreat, when the elevator came to life and Pavlik walked up to them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think... Sim is here?"

The elevator creaked to a stop, yawned and out emerged the director, a thick scarf about his neck, an air of fine perfume and flamboyance around him as usual.

"Ah! Sweet darlings. There you are. Anton, so good to see you. Pavlik. Look. Irina Marinova herself, the star of my show!"

Irka looked at her feet.

"Hey, Sim. I thought... we were to meet you at the terminal?" Said Pavlik.

"Sim! The pleasure is mine." Said Anton meekly. "Yes, same here. I was going to bring them over to the—"

"Train station? Oh no, old friend. We had to have tea. For good luck and good voyage? I brought you something here, something I believe you asked for. Some sweet sweet... sugar cookies." He grinned and without waiting for an answer or an invitation, strode inside, chatting loudly and unrolling his scarf, then freezing mid-move, his arm hovering.

Marina's chunky form marred the floor at the end of the hallway, her chest rising and falling to rhythmic snoring.

Irka didn't think she saw anything like the expression on Sim's face. It was recognition, and repulsion, and horror, and disgust, as if he has seen something like this before, as if he has suffered from the same pain Irka has suffered.

Was his mother an alcoholic too? She wondered.

As if reading her thoughts, Sim slowly turned and looked at the girl, lingering on her for a tad too long, then he faced the Boims, still speechless.

Anton spread his arms. "This is, uh... Sim, we're sorry. Do excuse us. We must apologize, an unexpected visit, you see, from..." He glanced at Irka, hesitating.

"Oh, say it papa. Say it already, enough of this polite bullshit." Pavlik snapped.

"Pavlusha!" Yulia exclaimed, outraged.

He didn't react, never taking his eyes from the director. "Sim, let me clarify what is happening here. This is Marina Marinova, Irina's mother, and Irina would appreciate it if—" he stared at his parents, and at Margarita who stealthily emerged from the kitchen, "—none of you made a fuss about it and we could leave ASAP."

Irka shot him a look of gratitude.

Sim came back to life, giving the plastic bag wrapped around what looked like a shoebox to Anton. "Here. If you'll excuse me. I must be not feeling well. Kids. Car. Now."

By the time Anton took the bag and said his thanks, Sim was out the door, and Irka thought he might vomit right there and then, holding on to the railing by the stairs, rattling out his lungs while waiting for the elevator.

Chapter 53. Onto The Tour

They embarked on a road filled with trains and cockroach-ridden hotels the likes of which typically caused Sim to yell and scream and complain loudly to the impassive management, but promised Irka endless excitement. She was looking forward to the tour. She had never traveled on a sleeper train before, never checked into a hotel, never seen any other city except Moscow or those little towns on its outskirts that brought only desolation to the hearts of those brave enough to visit and endure the grey vistas riddled with boxy helter-skelter stores, even boxier *mnogoetazhkas*, and a constant stream of surly inhabitants dressed primarily in black, scurrying on their way to work or from work or to get drunk to forget about work or home or both.

Most importantly, for a month Irka had a place to live.

For a month she was safe.

After spending an hour trying to find a parking spot and finally succumbing to bribing a guard, Irka, becoming increasingly agitated, ogled around. Spending most of her childhood in her neighborhood, at school or on the street or in her flat, only occasionally visiting Soviet museums full of propaganda regalia, she hardly saw anything else, or had the

money or motivation, her mother never taking her places, the rest of the Marinova household deeming her an idiot and a waste of time to bother.

Sim ahead, his scarf acting like a beacon, Pavlik and Irka, holding hands, trodded behind him, against the current of arriving hopefuls to the railway station, one of Moscow's oldest, its terminal building stacked like a fairy tale cake on the outside, and riddled with a labyrinth of tunnels, passageways, stairs, tickets booths, and numerous train platforms on the inside, a mecca for illegal prostitutes, thugs, petty thieves, low criminals, and endless *babushkas* trying to sell everything from home knit socks to boiled corn to flowers, to kittens and puppies to anyone who would care to look, displaying them on the floor in grubby boxes, whining into people's faces, coaxing them to buy, buy, buy.

Irka thought perhaps she could sell the stolen jewelry like that, standing by the train station, only how would she be able to, without talking?

"Wait here." Said Sim, strolling to a booth behind the glass of which sat a stone-faced matron, oblivious to an arguing old woman on the other side, an *avoska* in one hand, a train ticket in the other, shaking it.

Nervous, Pavlik and Irka looked around, scanning the crowd for anyone dressed in black, which was futile, as most people in

the winter did. Or brown. Or grey. Hardly any color, all of them blurring into a mass of charcoal figures making a noise like a pack of rats scampering across asphalt.

Irka gripped the pepper spray in her pocket, then fumbled with the scalpel, then with the pepper spray again, two of which Anton bought for them and handed them right after Pavlik arrived from the hospital.

Pavlik took her other hand. "Look, I'm so so very sorry. I know what you're thinking. Papa is, well... I can guess what he told you. Back home, I mean. On the landing." Pavlik said, looking straight ahead. "I saw it on your face. Did he ask you to leave me alone? Was that it?"

Irka shrugged.

"He did, didn't he. I knew it." Pavlik sighed. "He's simply scared, scared like I am." His voice fell an octave lower. "Listen. I can't... Please, Irina, what do you want me to say? How can I justify it to you? I don't even know where to begin." He passed a hand through his hair.

Irka studied Pavlik silently. It unnerved him.

"It's no excuse, I know, but I had to get rid of it, it was eating me from inside for years, Irina, for years. I didn't plan to, I promise. I was going to hold out until we got married." Tears stood in his eyes. "It slipped out, okay?"

Irka touched his face. She still loved him, she would love him forever, but some instinct inside her was working on chasing it deep down the drain of her emotional chute, locking it up in some dingy forgotten chamber, for her to survive. She broke sweat from effort, fighting it. Stubborn, it fought her back, and she shook, visibly shook, straining to break its spine, to mash it into nothing, to kill it.

Pavlik blinked. "Say something."

Irka's lips parted, but only some kind of an animal moan escaped through. Infuriated, she pinched herself hard through the pocket, then grabbed the scalpel and poked herself with its dull end. Again, and again, and again. She barely felt it. At this point her body was beyond hurting, clocked into survival mode. Her mind had already started working out possible sources of income and a place to raise her baby. Even if she stole a diamond worth the price of the whole apartment, she had no means of selling it. That left either begging Ilinichna to live with her or begging Sim or making money some other way, because whatever she was supposed to make from the premiere never materialized due to her absence, and she didn't know how much she'd make from the tour. That left one more thing, something she held on to for the black day, the blackest of them all.

Lyosha said she had amazing skills. Perhaps it was time to start using them. She promised to be a good mama, promised her

baby to take care of it, didn't she? And for that, anything went. Whatever she had to do to carve out a life for her child that would differ from the one she had, she was determined to accomplish.

Irka outright shivered. Two forces collided inside her, the childish naivete and the practical cynicism. Her typically logical and somewhat primitive attitude of persistence crumbled. She couldn't understand what was going on, scrambling at her thoughts, watching them flash across her vision, blurring Pavlik's words, his fervent attempt to explain how everything might still work.

"...and I'll send you money. I'll support you. Promise. It will be dollars, Irina, dollars, you could rent yourself a place. You could live alone. You could, I don't know..."

"Ready, pumpkins?" Sim waved tickets at them, beckoning them to the platform.

They both startled, uncomprehending at first, the shuffle and the scuffle and the stink of train exhaust around them blending into some kind of unreality.

Pavlik snapped out of it first. "Yeah. Yeah, we are."

As it often happened, the train was late, which was good, because most actors were late as well, John including, who swaggered up, a fancy suitcase rattling behind him, eyes

directed at both Irka and Pavlik, Katya hanging on to him as if she was permanently glued to the boy.

"Hello, hello! So you are coming with us then?" He exclaimed, leaning in for an air kiss on each cheek. "How wonderful! We heard you were planning to elope, you naughty naughty kids." He laughed.

Katya picked it up and sniggered.

They exchanged a rather prolonged hug with Sim.

"I'm so excited." John said with shiny eyes, in between greeting other actors and passing the stern conductor woman, who checked their tickets and ushered them inside. "A tour around The Golden Ring! It will be awesome." He added something else, but it got lost in the hullabaloo of departure.

Irka felt disoriented, clutching Pavlik's hand, wanting to hold on to someone solid, anyone, sensing the ground parting under her feet and for the first time not wanting to disappear, to fall through to turn to dust. He was looking at her, was asking her something, concerned, she didn't hear. Sim joined him. Irka only gaped helplessly, buried in anxiety that began to escalate into panic. Everywhere she looked, she saw faces of men in black caps, Lyosha's face, her mother's face, Roma's face, the gang, Konkin. She tried shaking her head, it didn't help. She was surrounded by them, whispering, coaxing, cajoling. Everything else came at her from the end of the tunnel.

She mechanically stared at the narrow passageway and inside the compartments as they passed them, smelling stale carpet and mold. They arrived to their coupe, yanking open a sliding door. It had four cots, two on each wall, covered in atrocious mauve linoleum, a tiny formica table by the window, dusty curtains covering its bottom, gathered across a fishnet string, its upper half open, letting in the racket from the platform and cool February air.

John and Katya motioning Pavlik and Irka to join them.

"Pavli, will you look after Irina please? She doesn't look too good. I'm at the head, darling. Come see me when you pussies settle in." Threw Sim over the shoulder, rolling his suitcase and disappearing into the nose of the salon.

Irka blinked, that much broke through her haze, and she was in it, shivering.

"He's in the special coupe, for two people only." Said John conspiratorially, and winked at Pavlik, who smiled weakly, smitten by his flair, the shiny teeth, the tan, the blond hair.

Irka heard them and didn't, like an echo, her ears were ringing, white dots danced in front of her eyes. The train lurched, and Irka with it, nearly falling. It jerked to a stop, lurched again. Somebody whistled on the platform, they stood still for another minute, then slowly departed, to the steady

staccato of the wheels, picking up speed, into a string of identical days and nights.

Irka founded herself seated, sipping tea brought to them by the conductor, a short woman with a body that had no neck or waist or legs, a column of flesh stuffed into a uniform, a brightly painted mouth pressed shut, slamming metal holders and glasses and hot concoction inside them without a word or not so much an acknowledgement of the passenger's existence, which puzzled John to no end, Katya whispering in his ear, explaining.

Pavlik held her by the shoulders, she barely registered his presence, watching trees fly by the window, seeking out black cars on the roads when they passed them.

Eventually, fatigue took over her. Irka slept on the bottom, across Pavlik, and John and Katya on the upper cots. Irka thought about nothing and everything at the same time, letting the train's beat lull her to sleep and waking up to everyone rising, dressing, getting ready to depart, which was going to be a common routine for them all the way into spring.

Carried away by listening to John's accounts of him performing on Broadway and what New York was like and what America was like, Pavlik forgot to go see Sim as he requested, who sleepily poked his head in the morning, directing them to get ready for arrival.

Irka never had an emotional breakdown, usually tuning herself out and escaping it, but this goodness she tasted from Pavlik had peeled her apart, and she hovered above the ground, her feet so lifeless she didn't feel them stepping, didn't feel them moving at all, turning into a robot.

The shabby platform under steel sky, the crumbling depot, the shaky bus ride and the brooding and occasionally exploding with Sim's demands and clerk's shrill opposing check-in at the hotel across the town's theater, blended into one for Irka, her anxiety slowly escalating into panic, then outright terror.

She grabbed onto Pavlik so hard, her fingers left marks on his wrist. Guilty, he endured without a word, ceasing to attempt to engage her, exchanging worried glances now and then with Sim, Irka oblivious to both of them.

Pavlik knew what to do, that's what she loved about him. He read her like her diary, she never needed to say anything, he simply sensed it.

"You stay here. I'll go find the phone, and ask them how they are, okay? I will lock you, so don't worry. Be back in a minute." He said, and was gone for more than an hour, in search of a phone, while Irka made herself unpack his things, hang his shirts on hangers Yulia provided, as the room they stayed in had none, took out his shoes, his socks and underwear and pants, put them into creaky drawers, then sat on one of two beds, which

immediately sagged under her weight, gazing around. She had to find something else, anything, to occupy herself, to keep the panic away.

The door opened and Sim waltzed in.

Irka jumped, her heart leaving her for a second, then ringing across her skull like a bell.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, sugar bird. May I?" He sauntered inside before Irka could so much as nod. In fact, she couldn't move at all, rigid as a rock. "Where is your lovely fiancé? Where did he go?"

Pavlik entered, his face flushed.

"Ah! Sim. I'm sorry. On the train... we got carried away a bit and--"

"I understand, cherry love, things happen, especially if you share your coupe with John. He would chat your ear off, he's a talker, that one. A talented talker at that. Oh, my sweet kittens, if only you had the chance to see him on Broadway. He's marvelous, superior, extraordinaire!" Sim rolled up his eyes.

"We'd love to, Sim, no doubt. You're saying it like it's easy. Just go buy the tickets and go see him." Said Pavlik.

Irka waited, tense.

"Never mind. That's not why I'm here. You may have guessed, my sweets, the topic of our discussion, although I would much prefer to converse about art." He cleared his throat.

Irka stole a glance at Pavlik. He sat stock still. "No, not really..." He ventured.

Sim suddenly grew somber, studying both of them silently. "I want to talk to your father, Anton Boim."

Irka vibrated. What did they do wrong, what did Pavlik do wrong? Did she do anything wrong? Were they about to be thrown out of the theater?

"You two should proceed with the marriage. It will benefit both of you." He said, measuring out each word, fingers interlaced over his knees, one foot tapping.

"Wait, what? I don't... why do you think we wouldn't get married? Whatever gave you that idea?" Said Pavlik, acting confused.

But Irka knew. She could tell Sim sensed it when he paid them a visit, and guessed this was the reason he paid the visit in the first place, to check on the atmosphere in the family, due to Pavlik's acting strange. This only added to her restlessness.

"I know what you did right before your departure. Pavel Boim." He cleared his throat. "I'm proud of you. We've never talked about this openly, but I think we should have. It's as much my fault as it is yours."

"You're confusing me, Sim. What are you talking about?" Pavlik pleaded.

"Sweetness. Pussy pie. Honey bun!" Said Sim, his voice rising. "I know you and your father well enough to be able to tell when a catastrophe of gigantic proportions has befallen your household. Am I correct?"

He was playing the guessing game, Irka figured. This was a brutal way to force the truth out of Pavlik, and she cringed, hating him a little for it, tugging on Pavli's sleeve.

He hesitated.

"We agreed to never lie to each other, did we not? If you're afraid because Irina is here, I think you should reevaluate your fears, gorgeous. She's your future wife. Your union will dissolve if you base it on lies. You have each other to hold on to, children. You must trust each other. Well?" He waited.

Irka glared at him. Didn't he promise America to every boy he dragged into bed? She wondered if he made them all the same promise about never lying. How convenient, to wiggle truths out of their pliable minds.

Pavlik shook like a leaf. "I told him." His voice cracked. "I told... everyone. I just... I couldn't lie anymore, Sim, I couldn't! I don't want to lie! I'm tired of it, so tired. So tired..." He hung his head, expecting a lecture.

"Come here, bunny, come. Now, now." Sim scooped him like a child, rocking his vast shape back and forth, back and forth.

"It's great that you did." He kissed the top of his head. "I'm proud of you. Only... I hope you didn't chalk up our inspirational talks and close intimate bond to the nature of your sexual preference?" He stopped rocking, his eyes sparkling.

Irka felt disgusted.

"No, of course not. Never." Pavlik stammered.

"Marvelous, marvelous. Listen. Let it stay that way, okay? It will only complicate your life even more. You don't want to hurt your parents, do you? They have enough on their hands, I'm afraid. As much as I have respect for your father, I don't think he will understand... You, sugar mama, on the other hand, fully understand the nature of love and art and what we have to sacrifice to achieve the divine, don't you?" He was addressing Irka.

She stared, furious.

"Were you able to talk to Anton, by the way? How is that... ransom going?"

"They are delivering it tonight. Thank you, Sim, thank you so much for everything you've done for me, I'm forever grateful, I'm—" Pavlik was muttering.

Irka fought the urge to make him stand up, to make him stop. She fisted the covers on the bed, to control herself.

"Oh, please. Stop it." Sim waved him off, clearly enjoying it. "Some meager ten thousand. Pfft. It's just money. Money can

be printed. Not you, honey. I can't lose the star of my show, can I?"

"But, I thought, John..." Blurted Pavlik.

"So naïve, so young, so gullible. Politics, my boy, politics. Connections. This is how it works, you can't just ask someone for a favor, you give them a favor first, you get my drift?"

Pavlik's face cleared, like a sky from clouds. "Is that's why—"

Sim interrupted him. "Correct. I see we're tiring our young lady here. How are you feeling, my love? How is that unborn cuteness inside of you, sucking out all your juices, leaving anything at all for my bonbon mama?"

Irka looked at Sim, stupefied. It suddenly dawned on her what might happen. All these cramps and pains and heaviness. What if she was going to give birth prematurely? While traveling? What if it happened onstage? Or, worse, on the train? She crusted with fear all over.

"You feel like you can keep up with everyone, with that belly of yours?" Asked Sim.

Irka nodded affirmatively, deciding to keep her abdominal pains to herself for as long as possible.

"Fantastic, fantastic. I was very worried about you two, you know? Oh, I couldn't sleep, couldn't sleep! That leech,

Konkin, I should've guessed. What an outrage." He shook his head. "I want you to listen to me. Don't give in. Fight. Tell me. How do you fight hate? Let's see if I taught you anything." Sim prompted Pavlik with a wave of his hand.

"With love." Said Pavlik. "Oh, but Sim, how can you possibly love those morons! Are you telling me you loved Konkin? Did you see that lack on intellect oozing out of his eyes, oozing from every pore on his face like he wanted to dissolve you just because you *existed*?"

"Make art and show them beauty, gorgeous. Wiggle into their frozen hearts, perform like gods! And for that, darlings, you need practice, practice. I want you to give up your fears, I want you to think about that first heavenly kiss you tasted on your lips, that first pang in your heart, the way mountains and sun and sky look into your soul. I want you to throw it in their faces. I want you to be full of it, to explode on stage. You hear me?" He stood, gesticulating. "I want you to blast them! With sensuality, with desire. I want lust! Love! Passion! I want you to leak it, to be wet, my kittens—" he stroked underneath both of their chins, lifting their faces.

"Kill them with affection!" He spread his arms, yelling at the room. "Adore them! Have compassion for your enemies, because it's not what they expect. From heart to heart. It's the only way to fight, and I want you to fight. You, Pavel Boim, and you,

Irina Marinova, I want you to stop being afraid and fight, lovelies, because, remember, we only live for so long in this magnificent place, and it's up to us to fuck it up—" he yelled that last bit, "or to make it beautiful."

He heaved, smiling, expecting applause.

Pavlik and Irka sat, pressed into the bed by his stare, slowing raising their hands and clapping.

"Thank you, thank you." He bowed theatrically. "Now. Up. Up you go. Let us rehearse, let us act, let us create." And they walked out after him, into the theater across the street, to start a string of performances that boldly stated that love could bloom even in the darkest corner of a blackest raven, crushed, stamped into dirt, and left to die.

Chapter 54. The Traveling Theater

For the next several days Pavlik couldn't reach home by phone, the signal always busy, which meant three things. Either someone was always on the phone, highly unlikely, or the line was cut, highly probable, or Anton unplugged it, suspecting it being tapped. Or, Pavlik told Irka, there could be the fourth possibility, but he was unwilling to think about it, and neither should she.

Sim didn't like the silence either, tiring out the whole troupe with rehearsing for the weekend run after which they were supposed to depart on the train to the next town, for what Sim hoped would become one of the first successful plays to rock the stagnant minds of post-Soviet public not used to exuberance, lavish costumes, outrageous display of sexuality and passion, some mythical offensive birds monkeying around some hideous gigantic raven in the middle, as local press mocked them, calling Novy immoral, poisonous, going as far as deeming his plays *art trash*.

Sim only boasted about it, bringing newspaper clippings, explaining that we, they, him, the play, the actors, the story, was breaking minds, and this was the evidence. The actors

cheered him, they clapped, he demanded from them more and more and more. Irka went with the flow, growing restless at the absence of news. Pavlik turned gloomy, disappearing more often to hang out with John, while Irka denied every invitation, spending her free time in bed, sweating, horrified the cramps might get worse.

She was resting before the performance when Pavlik barged in, his face gone, only eyes staring at her, huge, terrified. "They couldn't..." He blurted, sitting next to her. "Couldn't deliver the money." He managed.

Irka sat upright, adrenalin making her jittery.

"Papa called the hotel at last. He unplugged the phone, that's why I couldn't reach them. There was another murder."

Irka snatched his arm.

"No, no, no. Don't worry. Nobody we know. Mama and grandma are fine. Your mother is fine too, he said she left the next morning and called to confirm. They don't know who killed whom. In that apartment, remember, where that guy was...? On New Years? Yeah, that one. It was cordoned off. Militia, ambulances, the whole shebang. Papa said even if he wanted to, he couldn't get through. He thinks maybe they didn't want to share the dough and one of them decided to nuke the others? I don't know. It's all a speculation at this point." Pavlik gulped, catching his breath. "I just found out, just now, and ran straight to you."

Irka began shaking.

"They don't know what to do with the money now. Papa is afraid to hold it in the house. They're all terrified. He said he'd put it in a safe, at the terminal or something, but he's afraid to leave. Afraid to go to work." He stuck a hand in his hair and fisted it. "This is horrible. When is it going to end, Irina? What kind of a deranged country are we in? What should we do?" He whined now.

"Stay here. Tour. Play. Do your job like nothing happened. Yell out the truth onstage. That is what you do." Sim stood in the doorway, apparently having heard the last bit. They were so carried away with their conversation, they didn't hear him enter.

"But Sim..." Began Pavlik, turning around.

"Do you want to hide your whole life like a pathetic cockroach or do you want to do something worth vile about it?" Sim's face turned red.

And so they did. Day in and day out, one town after another, they threw themselves into acting, striking a nerve with the audience, delivering their best, Irka outshining herself each time, waves of compassion rolling off her like steam, as Sim put it, punching the audience with her stare, with her mute face, it ringing louder than their yells and cheers and screams at the end of each show, Irka, sweaty, her bird mask

obscuring her vision, peering into the darkness of the auditorium, straining to pick out anyone familiar, any face, or maybe someone in black, someone aiming at crushing her, challenging them with her open pose, carrying her bulk with pride, her mind gone into an alternate reality to the point of her body conforming, the baby growing calm, her pains dulling.

She refused to think about the future, refused the past to drag her down, for as long as they toured, she lived in the now, letting go, experiencing emotions to their fullest, laughing soundlessly at actor's jokes, crying desperately and silently when she stumbled one night on Pavlik sucking off John, on his knees, John's broad back to her, head lifted up, moaning, Pavlik freezing when he saw her, apologizing. Too late. Irka fled, running along hotel corridors like a delirious lunatic, repeating inside herself, *this is art, all of this is art, art and love, love and beauty, our heartbeats are connected as are our heartbreaks, we are bound by our nerves into one fabric of this stark life, trying to make the best of it, stumbling along like blind puppies, thinking we know, not knowing anything, not knowing shit.*

She took on grunting more, willing herself to make noise, trying to speak, staring at herself in the mirror in various hotel bathrooms for hours, moving her lips, chugging water, slapping her face, giving herself bruises, then running out and

tracing lines on the walls with spread fingers, the paper ring always on her, her mouth open in an attempted scream, until one day Pavlik told her he was worried she was going crazy, to which Irka nodded, a feverish smile on her face.

Oh yes, yes I am. She thought. So what? I don't care. I'm happy. I don't know when I'll die. Maybe one of them assholes will shoot me off the stage, maybe they'll blow us up, maybe the whole planet will explode from the next atomic bomb. Well then. I want to live now. She stepped up to him, challenging him.

They were on their third town, putting on makeup themselves in a drafty closet doubling as the dressing room, local theater being too small to accommodate all of them. Anton Boim tried delivering money twice since the last time Pavlik talked to him, without success.

Pavlik took a step back, a shadow of freight passing him. "Irina. Can I tell you something? I'm concerned... about the way you're acting lately. I have a theory about it. Do you mind if I share it?"

Irka only smiled. This was lately her default answer to everything, to John's jokes, to Sim's reprimands, to actor's gossip and even to those who came backstage from the audience, to get her autograph, something unheard of for Irka that made her want to stick her face in ice to stop it from boiling.

"I'm really worried about you. Please, listen to me."

Continued Pavlik. "I can tell your mind is somewhere else. Can I have your attention for a few minutes? Just a few. I promise. See, so the thing is, Sim likes to talk in allegories. It's his... stick. His method, so to speak. Directing principle. I hope you're not taking him too seriously, are you? All this beauty and art and connectedness bullshit? I mean, it's not bullshit of course, but you know what I mean? It has a degree of philosophical meaning to it, it's not literal. It's designed to be interpreted, like, *not* taken at face value. You understand that, right?"

So what? Irka looked at him. *What does it change? It changes nothing.*

"Irina, please. You're scaring me. Something has changed and I can't put my finger on it."

I'm not afraid to die anymore. Irka twisted out of his grip and fled the room, stomping to the dusty stage where local stage workers were assembling the structure once again for tonight's show, smoking away and chatting about how ridiculous this thing was and how they have nothing better to do and this whole theater is a crock of shit and they need a shot of vodka and whatnot, then stopped, ogling her, calling out to her.

"Hey, miss! Miss actress!"

"Hey, come hang out with us!"

Irka passed them, tracing the velvet of the curtain with her hand, moving for the sake of moving, of feeling, as if something told her that soon she won't be able to move as free, free as a bird she portrayed in the Raven, and she had to take it in now, as much as possible, to store it for the future, for the enclosure of dark days, because of course dark days would come, they always did, *always*, especially when you least expected them.

Irka knew this, and she was ready.

Chapter 55. Back In Moscow

The moment they stepped down from the train on the platform, Irka knew something was wrong. It hung there, this wrongness, right in front of her. She couldn't tell how she knew, but her gut told her she was right. The weather itself went berserk. It was raining, too warm for March. The snow melted into sticky slush. Irka raised her hood, clutching her backpack, staring ahead.

In the thick of the crowd, of those who came to meet them, meet other actors from the troupe, Anton stood out. He was alone, an umbrella over his head, his glasses somehow sad looking, his face pasty. This was strange. As much as they bickered, Anton and Yulia always tried to go places together, especially if it concerned their son.

"Papa!" Exclaimed Pavlik. "Oh God, I'm so glad to see you! Are you okay? I was beyond myself. What happened? Tell me, tell me. Is everything all right? How is mama? Grandma?"

Irka silently stepped up, within hearing distance, sensing hostility on the part of Anton toward her and, puzzled, deciding not to move closer.

"My apologies, Pavlusha. They're fine, everyone is fine. Thank you for asking. Your mama is cooking your favorite, borscht. Sorry for the silence. I simply couldn't get in touch, too busy, too busy!" He gave an unnatural laugh. "Sim, how did the tour go? You look well."

Sim flopped the scarf over his head. "What is this weather? Ugh. I'm good, good. Now, I want the news."

"We delivered the money." Said Anton mechanically. "Everything is all right. I'm eternally grateful to you for helping my son. This is, by the way, what we owe." He looked around, as if checking for danger, and started opening his briefcase.

"No, no, no. Not here. Why don't we come to my apartment, have a glass of wine, chat? We have lots of stories to tell. It was absolutely fantastic, Anton, spectacular, simply spectacular. These two..." He rounded Irka and Pavlik "...outdid themselves. Did you read the press?"

"Yes, certainly. Yes, I did." Said Anton blankly.

"Papa, something wrong?" Asked Pavlik.

"Why? Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Everything is excellent." He threw Irka a venomous glance. "Your wedding is scheduled for next week, so we better get home. There's lots to plan."

"What? Next week already? What day? You could've at least called and consulted me on this." Pavlik scoffed, trying to

sound upset, but Irka could tell he was thrilled by the news that their wedding was that close. It meant his fast departure, which was bitter sweet, as he told her, he said he'd miss his parents very much. And her. But he mentioned his parents first, and that stung.

"Sorry, Pavlusha, there was no time for me, no... opportunity." He spoke flatly.

Irka felt first pangs of panic.

Pavlik frowned, picking up the same vibe.

"Ah, the wedding!" Sim attempted to dilute the tension. "Congratulations! That's exciting. Have you picked out the venue yet? The restaurant? I know a few chefs, good friends of mine, downtown Moscow. Let me know if you want me to put in a word."

So they trotted out, dodging the crowd, eventually Sim and Anton breaking off, walking ahead, quietly conversing, while Pavlik and Irka fell behind.

"Sim said, after we get married, it would be easier for me to get the American visa. You know, they let you go if you leave something of value here, for you, at least. Like, if you have a wife, they think it's a good indication you will come back. A wife and a child is even better. Or real estate. For example, if you have an apartment to your name. That's very clever, don't you think?" Pavlik waited for Irka's reaction.

They've been discussing his future in America often lately, both enjoying their escapism, Pavlik into the land of leaving the country that hated his guts thinking him a virus, and Irka into the world of the theater, Sim's play, the freedom, merging with her character so successfully, it often took her a while to get out. And now she was back, and her illusion was over.

She nodded to Pavlik's ranting on about the visa rules, thinking how peculiar it was that a wife and a child were put in the same category as a house, like an inanimate object to own, or to dispose of, which was largely her experience in life.

They passed the main entrance and were now waiting for the taxi in long line, Sim and Anton whispering to each other ahead of them, people pressing on them from all sides, cars splashing mud so that occasionally someone would shriek or curse, shaking off wet splats from their sleeves or pants or bags.

Irka observed the conundrum with growing unease.

Anton's and Sim's profiles looked grim. Whatever it was they talked about, didn't look happy. And Pavlik... Pavlik was still in his bubbly anticipation.

He glanced at Irka. "I know what you're thinking. It's despicable how they round up the spouse to the same value as a pile of bricks. But. The way I see it, it makes sense. They need a good motivator for you to come back, right? Mama and papa still don't know, by the way, so please, shhh." He lowered his

voice. "Sim says we could go as soon as right after the wedding. I'm... I'm so torn, Irina. I wish I could stay with you, wish I could be what you want me to be, a good husband, a good father... I hope you will forgive me. Will you forgive me?" Pavlik tried to hide it, but his face radiated thrill, and Irka ignored her dismay, her emptiness at the thought of parting with him, trying to be happy for him, nodding, smiling, this new habit of hers picked up from Sim's inspirational rants.

Sim threw up his arms, saying something louder than he intended. Pavlik and Irka stretched their necks, attempting to intercept what it was they were discussing, when a wave of liquid mud doused their feet and Sim screamed. "Can you watch where you're going?"

Anton grumbled. Pavlik hopped away from the curb. Irka tuned out the rest. It wasn't the car that got her attention, brand new, bright red, it was the driver.

The car rolled up to them in the midst of taxis and *chastniks* with their sorry *Zhigulis*, trying to make a buck on ferrying people home, fighting for passengers, who constantly broke the rules of the line, jumping ahead, or waving someone down and making a deal right on the spot, offering more money to be taken out of order. Sim would've done the same, but he was busy listening to Anton. The car screeched to a stop in front of

them, a new *Lada*, and out came Lyosha, a brand new sheepskin coat and a new fur hat festooned around his stump of a head.

"Hey there! I was looking all over for you. Care for a ride?" He lumbered around, clearly showing off, staring blatantly into their faces. "*Blyad*. Fuck my face. If it isn't the famous di-rector. Theater di-rector. Novy, right? You do plays? I heard. Lyosha Ivanenko." He stretched out his hand, waiting for Sim to shake it.

Cars honked, blocked by him stopping in the middle of the lane.

"Bloody whores. Keep quiet! I'm talking to a famous di-rector here." Lyosha snapped, still sneering, still expecting Sim to shake his hand, his face gradually turning sour.

Sim calmly looked him up and down. "Excuse me. Do I know you?"

Anton's face turned from pasty to white.

"You don't, but this Jewish faggot here sure does." Lyosha motioned to Anton. "And his prick of a son heard of me too. Didn't ya?"

Pavlik bristled, but Irka yanked on his arm, all the while glaring at Lyosha, wanting to burn him. He was hers, it was her turn to hurt him, and she wouldn't allow anyone to steal her pleasure.

"I'm sorry, mister. You're disturbing and insulting us. If you don't mind—" Sim began.

"Is that how it is, huh? So fucking famous, can't shake a hand with a simple man?" Lyosha spat on his feet, and then time slowed down for Irka.

"Get in." Her told her. "Enough running around. I don't want you mixing with this trash no more. You're going where you belong."

Irka's senses sharpened to the point where she only saw Lyosha, Lyosha and nobody else. She watched him like a hawk, in slow motion.

"I heard the prick is not the father. Good for you. We'll fix this baby. Raise him right. Like a proper man, proper Russian."

Did you guess the baby is yours, you moron? Irka thought, staring a hole through Lyosha.

He raised his arm, aiming to make a go at her, to snatch her by the shoulder or the hood of her coat, she couldn't tell, but she was ready, oh she was, fantasizing about this moment since that September morning she ran away, never having enough courage to actually do it.

Hatred filled her, gave her clarity, pumped her heart slowly and deliberately. His face, that's all she saw, his piggy eyes, those stupid abhorrent slits that had zero brain in them,

only primitive lust, no, worse than that. He was a degenerate. His humping, grunting and grinding rung in her ears, these noises he made, kneading her, taking her against her will, and now she was done with it, done with him ordering her around like she was his property just because she happened to be a woman. More than that.

Irka was done with running away.

The powerful cocktail of emotions that was riding her reached a peak. Strangely calm and composed, cold and calculating, she extracted the pepper spray she fumbled with for the past minute in the pocket of her coat, jerked out the safety pin, aimed it at Lyosha eyes, and pressed the button, emptying the entire thing, until her finger burned.

It took a good ten seconds for all of it to come out. Rain barely drizzled by now, and it was a windless day. The contents of the spray successfully covered Lyosha's face, blinding him, rendering him speechless. He gasped, waved his arms, stumbled back into traffic and shrieked, cowering. He shrieked and shrieked and shrieked. The cars honked. People shouted. Somebody blew a whistle.

Irka savored the moment. She dimly realized being ushered off the sidewalk and into a taxi, but she saw nothing else, turning in the seat to watch Lyosha stumble around, her numb

fingers still clutching the pepper spray, until the taxi turned into another street and she couldn't see him anymore.

Chapter 56. The Truth

They sat silently in Sim's kitchen, Sim making tea and coffee, Anton fumbling with the plastic bag, Pavlik staring at Irka, and Irka smiling, strangely serene, as if she dropped a rock from her chest and nothing could faze her.

Anton cleared his throat. "Well, that was... how to say it. Let's see here. It's difficult to put it into words." He propped his glasses, concentrating on a coffee stain on the table.

"Please, Irina, help me understand. Your, uh, step-father, the security job he talked about, he's the member of Russian National Unity, we're all aware of it by now. But, here is the thing. I also have recently found out—" he measured both Irka and Pavlik accusingly with his eyes, "—that he was present at the time of the attack on you, the fact that you both neglected to disclose."

"Oh? Is that right?" Said Sim, placing steaming cups in front of them.

"Absolutely. That woman, the one who, well, Svetlana I think her name is, she helped them, must have. She met me by the building, warned me not to go in. She said he, Lyosha, terrorized her."

"What did he do, exactly?" Pavlik began.

Anton raised his hand for silence. "Please, Pavlusha, let me finish. This is important. We can talk about that incident later. I'm more interested in trying to fathom what happened today. Clearly, he is a vile and detestable man, but... that wouldn't be the reason to attack him in broad daylight. That was outright foolish." Said Anton, studying Irka. "You have only angered him further, and that will reflect detrimentally on all members of our family. Have you thought about that before making your move?"

It dawned on Irka that he was blaming her, and she flushed, glaring. Peaceful just a minute ago, she was swept by outrage. Lately her emotions liked to spike and subside in the matter of minutes, despite her best efforts to contain them.

"Not a very smart thing to do. It was egotistical on your part, to behave like that." Anton was on a roll, Irka could tell, prepared to give her a lecture of a lifetime. For a second she imagined what would be the difference in gutting Anton versus Lyosha. Who of them would squeal first, who would die faster?

"Papa!" Exploded Pavlik. "You have no idea what you're talking about! You can't even imagine—" he caught himself and stopped.

"Can't imagine what, Pavlusha?"

Sim inclined his head, lighting a cigarette and leaning back in his chair. "Anton, I'm sure Irina had ample reason to do what she did. I know her well by now. The silent brooding type. You do her wrong, she won't show it, but she'll carry the hurt for years, never forgetting, and she'll find the way to avenge herself. Am I getting this right, sugar bird?" He crossed his legs, watching Irka.

She looked them over, one after another, hungry to punch each of them in the face, momentarily horrified by the idea. There they sat, blissfully talking about her life as if they lived it, as if they knew how it felt. Anton, eyebrows raised questioningly over his glasses, the typical Moscow intelligentsia who thought he knew everything there was to know just because he read it in smart books. Sim, a playful smile across his lips, always twenty agendas on his mind, sly, slippery, and arrogant, yet warm and understanding when he wanted to be, the proper famous artiste. And Pavlik, the only one who knew the truth, the love of her life, polite and gentle, afraid to cause people pain, yet cowardly at the same time, hurt too much by people in his life to be able to stand up for himself. But even Pavlik didn't know what it was like to be her, and for a few scary seconds Irka was unable to make distinctions between him and others, they all looked to her the same. Men, stupid men who worry only about where to put their dicks, while

they could still get them up, or putting them their mouths once they stopped cooperating.

You want to know the truth? Is that it? You really want to know? Thought Irka. *Fine, I'll give you the truth.* She slipped off the chair and marched out of the kitchen, straight to Sim's cabinet, took a piece of paper and a pen from his writing desk and came back, settling into the chair, watching the men watch her write out of the corner of her eye.

She didn't mince words.

Lyosha raped me. Every night. For over a year. I'm carrying his baby. He doesn't know, neither does my mother. This is the true reason I ran away from home.

She held the paper up for all of them to see.

There was silence. Anton breathed loudly, taking off his glasses, cleaning them on his sweater, and putting them back on, to read it again, to make sure he saw it right. Sim smoothed back his hair, looking Irka over, the corners of his mouth turning down. Pavlik took her hand, giving it a squeeze.

Irka waiting for more reaction.

Anton was the first who broke the spell. "Well. Excuse me, but... if I may state my pinion here, I... I find this hard to believe. Irina, you sure you haven't imagined it?"

Irka wondered what tool she could use to squash Anton's head like a watermelon.

"How is this possible? I mean, wouldn't your mother have noticed something, anything? Anything at all? What about your grandmother, your great grandmother, your, I don't know, who else is it you live with, aunt? Why, your apartment is full of people, how is this... I don't understand." He spread his arms, looking at Sim for help.

"On the contrary, Anton. I'm not surprised at all. It's actually quite common. My darling darling girl..." He swapped at his watering eyes, and, the hand with the cigarette held aside, waltzed over to Irka and pressed her head to his chest, kissing the top of it.

Irka shook, thinking his tears were for show, sensing he didn't really mean it, he was puzzled and confused and horrified and covered it up with professional charm. She considered ripping her nails into his stomach.

"Oh, this is dreadful, simply dreadful." Sim's voice droned above her head. "I wish you would've told me earlier."

Irka twisted into an agonizing swirl of disbelief. *You wished? You wished? So this is my fault somehow, that I didn't tell? My fault?*

Pavlik tried hugging her but she rudely slapped his hand off. She wanted to bite him, wanted to bite all of them, to make them wake up, make them stop the pretense, because it was making her sick, and she was close to throwing up, the baby kicking up

into her diaphragm to add to the discomfort. "You can stay here for a while, if you want." Sim whispered in her ear, before letting go.

"And you knew this, Pavlusha? Did she tell you the same?" Said Anton cautiously.

"Yes." Said Pavlik, pressing his lips together and placing his arm protectively over Irka, giving her a wondering stare.

She scrutinized him, looking for an excuse to lurch at him and declare his compassion as fake. Because all of this, the conversation, the concern, the emotions expressed, they were all fake. None of these people had any idea what it was like to be taken against your will, to be turned inside out, to have your heart skewered on a prick and wrenched out of you through your vagina, and then have it stuck in your face, smeared in fresh blood, seeing with horror that it was your own.

Irka began hyperventilating. She was ready to give away her life, she would die tomorrow, if only right now, right this very moment, she could talk. She gagged with effort. Nothing came out, except a little croak that got lost in spoken words of others.

"And you said nothing? Absolutely nothing? Not to me, not to your mother?" Droned on Anton.

"She knows, papa." Said Pavlik.

Anton choked on his tea. "Oh, she does, does she? Since when? And why, may I ask, you deemed it pertinent to disclose to your mother, but not to your father?"

"I didn't disclose it. She found out... by accident."

"What accident?"

"Papa, please. Stop. It was not my secret to share, okay? I gave my word." Pavlik kept throwing glances at Irka, whose face lost color, her whole body so tense it looked like she was a human bomb about ready to explode.

"You gave your word. Of course. How clever." Anton gave Irka a dubious glance that lasted a few seconds. "Excuse me, son, but this is a very serious accusation Irina is making. Concerning the matter we are discussing here, it doesn't make a difference if the man in question is inherently violent or not, or what his political beliefs or his place of employment is. What I'm trying to get across to you here is that you simply can't simply point a finger at someone and say something like this without an overwhelming evidence. Who is to say Irina isn't lying to get attention to herself?"

"Papa, how can you say something like this!" Pavlik stood up, tearing his arm away from Irka.

She suddenly felt naked, unprotected, and sipped air in short hissing bursts, losing feeling in her feet first, then in her hands, sensing goose bumps march across her back, creep up

her neck, and desensitize her face, covering it with a layer of cold sweat.

"Boys, boys, now, now." Sim waved arms attempting to make Anton and Pavlik sit back down, who faced each other like two roosters preparing for a fight.

"Anton, frankly, I'm disappointed in your opinion. Really?" Sim arched his brows, clicking the lighter and walking over with a new cigarette to the window, waving it about and puffing out smoke as he talked. "Dear friend, please pardon me for saying the following, but... are you blind?"

"And you saying it's possible for, give me a second..." He silently moved his lips, calculating, the proper businessman that he was, always afraid to make a mathematical mistake. "Five. That's right. Five women. How could five women, five, Sim, *five*, overlook a child being raped every night for a course of a year? In a Soviet apartment? You're kidding me, right? The walls, Sim! They're paper thin. But that's beside the point. Irina must have shared the room with someone, they have only three bedrooms, I've been in her flat. They must have seen, must have heard something!" He got agitated, red rising in his cheeks.

"They ignored it. We generally don't like to see what we don't want to see in this country, my dear friend. You yourself are blind to things that happen right under your nose." Sim

looked scary, and Pavlik visibly shrunk. He slowly looked Irka over. She shook so bad, she could only stare. They both knew exactly what Sim talked about, but it took Anton a moment.

"Are you referring to... to..." Anton stumbled.

"Sim is referring to me being gay, papa." Said Pavik slowly. "Is it so scary for you to say it? Gay. See. Simple. Gay."

"Pavlusha!" Anton got scared. He turned to Sim. "Are you... aware of this fact?"

Sim threw his arms in the air. "Oh my sweet sugar pussies! What do you think? I knew it from the start, from the first time I laid my eyes on him at school. It's why I picked him. I love gays, my theater is full of gay actors, they have this fine attuned sensibility that sadly many lack. Look, I'm not discriminating in any way of my choice of actors. I only pick those who I connect with, heart to heart, who are transparent, who can carry emotion, and many of them happen to be not of traditional sexual orientation. It makes no difference to me, Anton, no difference!"

"Why aren't you admitting it in public, then? You always elude this question. Every interview I read—"

"Oh, this is ridiculous." Sim slammed his coffee cup on the table, unrolled the scarf, and rolled it back on his neck. "I can't believe you're saying this. Can't believe it."

They kept arguing, their primary source of irritation giving way to opinions on everything from homosexuality, to love, to art, to politics, to Russia in general and the immigration of Jews and not Jews and the leakage of Russian brains overseas and on and on and on in the same manner. They touched upon every problem under the sun, except Irka's.

Pavlik carefully nudged her and they slunk out of the kitchen to the bedroom.

"You don't look yourself." Said Pavlik, wiping Irka's face.

By now she has experienced a surge of lethal hatred, a bout of guilt and shame and self-deprecation, then pity for herself, then for her baby, then for people in general, then Irka didn't know anymore what she felt, thinking back again to the roof of her building, as if watching herself jumping from it, bursting apart like a ripe tomato, then wondering if it would be easier to slice herself open with a knife, and how that would look like, and—

"Irina, what's wrong?" Pavlik snapped her out of it.

Irka gulped air, fisted his sleeves and yanked on them repeatedly, hoping somehow this will drag her out of darkness, confused, terrified, and sick. Restless, her baby kicked around and she wanted to throw up.

"It's papa, isn't it? Oh God, I just want to kill him sometimes, this quiet investigation that he tends to engage in, like a robot..." Pavlik tugged at his hair.

What will happen now? Irka looked up into Pavlik's face, hoping to find a shred of stability there, but Pavlik himself was afraid, afraid of his past, afraid for his future, too afraid to notice her plight.

Please, tell me! Irka yanked harder. *I'm tired of thinking about things alone, tired of not being able to rely on anyone, I want to lie down and be taken care of, to not worry about what to eat or where to sleep or if I will be killed by the father of my child or not and when and how and will it be quick or will he torture me and where would he do it and—*

Pavlik flinched, shrugged, his thoughts close and yet far away. "Look, I'm scared too. I get it. I'm sorry about what papa said, I truly am, but I think he was trying to understand, to process the information you've given him, before giving in to the idea of the possibility that things like this happen. It's his survival mechanism. I never told you, but... please don't tell anyone, okay? He doesn't like people talking about it, doesn't like to be reminded of it. You see, his parents were gassed in a concentration camp, both. Them and his bother. He's the only one who survived. Math, facts, it's his stick, to hold on to, to keep living."

Irka nodded, her grip slacking.

"Still." Pavlik traced circled on the bedding with his finger. "What astounds me is that neither of them asked you how you felt, how did you manage to survive, or what is it you would like them to do, to help you with. It doesn't fit in my head, you know. I mean, Sim, at least Sim could've said something." He fumbled with the bed cover. "The more I think about it, the more I want to get out of here, I don't care how. I don't think I want to continue seeing Sim either, you know what I mean? He thinks he's so enlightened. And I think his view of the world is as narrow, only in a different way. The only thing is... See, this bugs me so much, I don't even know how to say it."

Pavlik took a deep breath.

Irka waited patiently for him to continue.

"Irina. I'm devastated you will be staying here. Please, tell me, is there anything I can do to help? Anything? Anything at all? I feel terrible, helpless. I feel like I'm letting you down." He covered his face.

Irka shrugged. This question always stumped her, the question of what it was she wished for someone else to do for her. She wasn't used to it, she always did things for others, first demanded out of her by force, then becoming habit, like her silence, ingrained so deep within her psyche, it would take a major effort to shake it off. She thought and thought,

motionless, and Pavlik didn't move either, perhaps out of fear of what she might tell him, or out of fear of what was in store for them in general.

And then, out of nowhere, Irka knew the answer.

She still held the pen in her hand, and she wrote on her palm. *Be happy. Have a good life. That will make me happy.* She offered her palm to Pavlik, and he looked at it for a long time, then looked up and studied Irka's face for a good minute, until finally he said. "I don't... deserve you. I simply don't deserve you."

Chapter 57. The Bribe

Ilinichna got a call from Vladimir's wife and immediately phoned Sim, who told everyone else. Eventually the news reached Pavlik and Irka. Konkin got murdered. Knifed to death in Roma's apartment in a drunken brawl, what seemed like. Him and a few of his buddies. They didn't know who the murderer was, and militia was still looking for the man. There was only one witness, a woman by the name of Svetlana, but she refused to talk. The entire theater buzzed with this information, and the fact that Konkin secretly organized riots and actions like defecating on people's cars and vandalizing their property, partly as his Russian National Unity work, partly fruits of his own sick imagination.

Anton argued that it was Lyosha's work, Yulia countered that it could've been anybody from those people in black suits, Lyosha including, they were all crazy, Pavlik and Irka sided with Anton, and Sim, after they explained to him Lyosha's nature, his pig butcher past, him already having served his time in jail for thievery, homicide being the next logical step up, only nodded and withheld his opinion, but Pavlik said they were

going to leave right after the wedding and that all documents were almost ready.

On the basis of this talk, Anton and Sim got into another fight, Anton urging Irka to go to militia and testify against Lyosha, or try and talk her mother into it, Sim saying that on her seventh month of pregnancy it would only cause an early birth, plus nobody would listen to her, especially because she was mute, they would only take out her soul and cause her anxiety, corrupted down to their bones, unless Anton wanted to spend the money on bribing the officials to start the case. And he needed his actors in top shape for the upcoming Moscow performances.

Nobody urged Pavlik to go testify for the beating he endured, as it would expose the reason for it, and that Boim family wanted to keep hush-hush. They were also somewhat relieved at the fact that, according to their speculations, to which Margarita contributed heavily, sighting her past and how it was done, that now the remaining Russian National Unity members will for sure hunt the offended down and deal him the fate they deemed appropriate for his behavior.

Irka listened to this all, terse, wincing at any loud noise, jumping from every touch, her nerves stretched tout like that clothes line, too many wet garments hung on it, about to snap. She tried burying herself with work, cleaning the kitchen

up to three times a day. Nothing helped. Her mind wound up tighter and tighter, generating scenarios for disaster after disaster, nightmare after nightmare, so much so that she could hardly sleep, rising exhausted in the mornings and dropping dead tired into bed every night.

There was more bad news. Under the shroud of extreme secrecy, Yulia told her son and Irka, for their own personal safety, that Lyosha showed up at their door and took all the money at knife point, that Anton was too embarrassed to admit it to them, that he had to sell most of his jewelry from the shop to make up for the rest of the cash that Sim let him borrow, and that she thought it was a bad idea for Irka to go home or have any sort of interaction with any of the Marinova people.

Irka thought she would break into bloody shards if she heard any more, throwing herself into washing every piece of clothing Pavlik owned, their bedding, then spending hours ironing it all, folding it, putting it away, and then promptly looking for something else to do, to clean, to scrub, to organize, anything, but to think.

One more irritant added to her mounting anxiety.

The phone trilled every day, sometimes several times in a row, and each time Yulia picked it up, Irka stood by, breathing hard, listening. Marina Marinova called since the troupe's arrival, screaming into the phone that her daughter was in

danger, that would they please save her, would they please take her out of the city or the country or—

Yulia slammed the receiver down each time without saying a thing. She wanted to unplug the phone completely, but Anton refused. The guests were calling. For the wedding.

The wedding was going to happen after all.

Sim convinced Boims that for Pavlik's future career a marriage and a child were sure winners, as well as for Irka's, to have a husband. People looked at you with respect if you had a proper family. Old Margarita backed him up.

Boims swallowed the bait.

Irka was elated, sensing opportunity to douse her panic with preparation. She was not alone. They all threw themselves into the mundane, hiding behind it, ravenously attacking every detail to drown the danger hanging over their heads, as if somehow it would become invisible and fade away like it never existed.

In a blink of time the date of the wedding rolled around, and they barely had enough time to thoroughly plan the ceremony, the dinner at the restaurant, the placing of the guests. There were more phone calls and visits to endure from the large Boim clan who were very curious of the whole pregnancy affair, and, as it turned out, some of them did indeed voice their doubts as to the identity of the father, others marveled at why Irka

didn't talk, her only shining quality to them being the fact that she was an actress. She could be weird, in their eyes, as an artiste. That suited Irka just fine.

She concentrated on physical tasks, for sanity's sake. The swirl of her emotions retreated into the back of her mind, cooking there, focusing into a murderous wrath directed at one person. *So Lyosha killed those guys, I'm positive. Good.* She thought. *Very good. I'd like to see him now, scared, shitting his pants, hiding out in some stinky hole. I'd like to look in his face, before I gut him like a swine that he is. I will gut him. Yes, I will, I swear I will.* She repeated this in her head like a mantra, going along with preparations, doing what she was told to do, listening to people and not hearing what they said, going as far as forcing herself to ignore Pavlik. Her inner goal became the preparation for an attack, which she knew was coming. Lyosha didn't just let anyone hurt him. He was bound to come back.

Irka was surprised he didn't come back already.

She stole a knife from Sim's kitchen, and a similar one from Yulia's, sharpening both in secret and talking Pavlik into giving her his pepper spray, just in case. She figured, if she carried one knife in each pocket, she would have a better chance to do real damage. Numb and dull on the outside, she was so mad inside, that it never crossed her mind as to how exactly she

would do it. She figured, when the time came, she'd do it the same way she did with the pepper spray, or die trying.

Lost in this thought, she stood in front of a shabby official building that housed the government institution ZAGS, while Pavlik slunk away with Sim to prepare his International passport. Yulia prodded Irka to step forward. They came here because Irka had to give a bribe, to be allowed to get married at sixteen. Official marriage age was eighteen, and that's how old was Pavlik, but not Irka.

"Go on. You'll catch a cold, standing here. Let's get this over with quickly and get out of here." Said Yulia, nervously looking around. Irka followed her gaze out of habit, trying to make out young men in black coats or black berets. There were none, only a mass of staggering or tottering or shuffling individuals, looking under their feet or straight ahead, zero emotion on their dull faces, hastily making their way along the street covered in dirty snow slush.

Irka slowly ascended the steps. They missed the marriage registration date, traveling with the theater, which was thirty something days. On top of it, there was a waiting list for the actual civil service to be announced husband and wife and to get their marriage license. Irka had to break all three rules, the marriage age, the time for registration, and the time for the ceremony. It was decided she would appeal to the clerk with her

innocence, pregnancy, and inability to talk, to soften him, or her. Best it was her.

It was him.

A balding man with a crooked grin and an unpleasant sour smell, the clerk resided behind a monster of a desk, covered a sheet of plexiglass. Irka, having patiently sat for close to an hour in line, enduring Yulia's lectures on the future of her and the baby, because now that Anton knew Pavlik wasn't the father, it was impossible to convince him to take Irka with them to immigrate, not that they could in the first place, her not being Jewish or having any money to contribute to the cost of travel, but... She whispered this into her ear, to make sure nobody heard, when Irka's name was announced.

"You're letting in the cold air. Don't just stand there. Come in and close the door." Said the clerk, tracing something slowly in a big journal spread open on his desk.

Irka shut the door and walked up.

"Name." Said the clerk without looking, although minutes ago he announced it to the entire corridor.

Irka placed the documents on his desk, waiting.

"I said, name." Repeated the clerk, raising watery eyes at her. "Are you deaf?"

Irka started.

"What did you do, swallow your tongue or something?"

Irka gulped, pointing to her mouth.

"So you did, huh? The miracle of silence, at last. You people gab my ears off all day long with your requests, like I'm a machine. I'm human too, you know." He complained, checking the papers, opening up the passports, looking at the photograph, checking it with Irka, his face suddenly growing long.

"What is this." He shook the passport at her. "Sixteen?"

Irka nodded, reaching into her pocket for the envelope with money, and stretching out her hand timidly.

"Who do you think I am, young lady!" Cried the man, pushing her hand away, but she saw how his eyes sparkled for a moment. The envelope she held was thick, and she thought she heard him calculating in his head just how many rubles, or, maybe even better, dollars, could be inside.

Irka knew the game. This was her opening move. She offered the envelope again.

The clerk shut his journal, to indicate the end of discussion. "Don't care." He said. "There are rules and regulations. I don't see why you think you're somehow special to have the privilege of breaking them. Get out." But his voice softened, and his eyes darted toward the envelope, and something else.

Bundled up in her white coat, Irka didn't look stately, not at all in her condition, but her boobs grew even more, and

balanced precariously on top of her bulging girth, her face rounded and grew pink, flushed with that young mother blood that caused many men to throw hungry glances at her whenever she ventured out of the house.

Irka knew what she had to do. If Sim didn't allow her to live with him, if Ilinichna didn't take her, if Boims sold their apartment upon immigrating instead of letting her watch it for them, as a single mother, she could still apply for a free apartment, couldn't she? That's what Nadezhda did, back in the days, when Valya was young and had Marina and Sonya, before her husband ran out on her. They waited ten years before getting a three bedroom apartment. Irka heard stories of single moms getting them in five or four or even three years, albeit one bedroom ones. She didn't care. As long as her and the baby had some corner to live in, and if not... Irka wasn't sure how it worked after the dismantlement of Soviet Union, but she hoped she was right. Worst case scenario, she could rely on free childcare and employment guarantee, Ilinichna said something about it. If it were true, she could least have steady income. She didn't care what to do, she'd do anything for money.

But more than anything, she wanted to get married to Pavlik because she loved him that much, wanted to have the experience, the memory for the rest of her life, preparing herself for his absence.

Irka took another step, smiled and offered the envelope again, this time sticking it into the journal.

"Sit." He said and pointed to the chair.

A woman's head poked into the room. "I'm with this young lady, can't you see? Wait for your turn!" Drawled the clerk. The door shut.

"So," he appraised Irka, eating her up, "they sent you in, young and fresh and mute, the family. Am I right?" He shifted closer to Irka.

She stiffened, turning herself numb.

"Do you love him? This... what's the name. Pavel Boim. Hmm?" His hand hovered next to her, too close. Waves of dribbling thirst poisoned the air between them, and Irka held her breath, nodding.

"That would be one lucky young man, with thighs like these." The clerk put his hand on her leg and started massaging it, watching her.

Irka stared at the wall without giving any indication of what was happening. The more dumb you acted, she knew, the faster it ended. They grew bored of her indifference, she learned it from an early age and wielded it like a weapon.

With the other hand the man opened the journal, snatched the envelope and stuffed it into a drawer of his desk, peeking inside and cracking in a satisfied grin.

"How much do you love him then?" His hand crept higher.

"What's so special about him, hmm? Just that he is young and can stick his cock up your cunt so high your brains get smashed, is that it?" He whispered hotly in her ear, jittering.

Irka sat still, disgust welling up in her. Familiar nausea, the feeling of which she has forgotten, reared its ugly head. She felt the knife in her pocket, briefly speculating what kind of noise the clerk's throat would make if she plunged it right in.

"Want to wait a couple months for neglecting the rules? I can make you wait, you know." He said. "You two couldn't wait though, it seems, could you?" He motioned to her belly.

Irka didn't move, afraid she'd snap, enduring his stubby hand and having a hard time.

Another head poked in.

"What?" Barked the clerk. Their bodies were hidden by the desk, so the woman couldn't see what he was doing.

"Innokentiy Anatolievich, there is a couple here—"

"Tell them to wait." He snapped.

The woman shut the door.

"No peace for me, see? At any rate, where were we. Hmmm. We were talking about your future husband, weren't we? You love him this much. Admirable, I must say. Good girl you are, will make

for a good wife." He took his hand off finally and smacked her thigh, to accentuate his point.

Relieved, Irka slowly stood, blood returning to her tingling muscles. She didn't know how much longer she could sit still without either puking or lunging at the man with a knife, and by the time she waddled out of the room, appropriate documents in her hand, she dashed past Yulia outside, gulping fresh air, sensing the bile receding, her hands steadying, her head clearing.

"Well! That took a while. How did it go? You got everything?" Yulia said, catching up to Irka.

Drained, Irka handed her the papers without so much as a shrug, and they were off, to get ready for the wedding and to strategize what was to be done about Lyosha who was bound to figure out the location of the restaurant, beating it out of Marina if she didn't tell him on her free will.

Chapter 58. The Preparation

The dress. Irka dreamed about having a beautiful snow-white wedding dress, but by now her midriff grew so large, none of the store bought dresses would fit her, especially because she wasn't thin to begin with. In the haste of preparation and determined to spend as little as possible on Irka since her family contributed nothing but grief, and the baby was not Pavlik's anyway, and the whole thing was done for Pavlik's benefit, mostly, Boims hired a cheap seamstress from one of the neighboring ateliers, and she fashioned something wearable out of a curtain, since to get good fabric in such a short amount of time was impossible. Plus, it didn't cost them a thing, it was from Margarita's apartment.

Irka twirled in front of the mirror. She looked like one of those padded warmers for teapots, stuffed with too much cotton, crudely stitched, with ridiculous sleeves and an even more ridiculous skirt, overly decorated with bows and folds and weird ribbons hanging here and there and catching on things when Irka walked. Apparently, this was the seamstress's idea of making Irka into a princess, her exact words from when she measured

her. Irka's belly looked huge in the garb, bigger than it was, accentuating it instead of hiding.

Irka soaked disappointment in washing her white coat till it couldn't be more clean, the one Pavlik bought her, the one she was planning on wearing over the dress with both knives and the pepper spray carefully concealed inside, just in case.

Everyone was invited to the wedding, Marinova women included, Irka's mother tearfully convincing Yulia that Lyosha had disappeared and that nobody knew where he was and that nobody would so much as breathe to him where the festivities would be held.

On Boim's side about twenty people were planning to come, including distant relatives some of which traveled to Moscow from other cities, given the fact that Pavlik was Anton's and Yulia's only child, a much coveted and respected and adored nephew, and cousin, and an uncle in one case. Of course, there was another hidden reason here as well, of which Irka guessed with Pavlik's help. Anton worked tirelessly on getting his wife and son out of the country. The wedding was to serve as a goodbye dinner of sorts, and, ironically, this hidden wish merged with that one of Sim, who planned to elope with Pavlik as soon as next week, his connections granting him fast International passport for Pavlik, which typically could take months, if one was lucky.

Pavlik not so much paced the room as he floated, telling Irka how Sim planned to announce their trip to America at dinner, making it a huge surprise and pretending like the tour opportunity presented itself last minute and apologizing for such short notice.

"Hey. How are you feeling? Nervous?" Asked Pavlik, aware that he talked about himself too much, picking out a tie to wear with his suit from a pile on the bed.

Irka nodded, ironing her coat to death.

They were due at ZAGS at two in the afternoon, to conclude the ceremony and obtain the marriage certificate, which Sim was going to take right away, to submit for the International passport for Pavlik the same day, and to come back later to dinner at six in one of the downtown restaurants, on the first floor of an old Moscow apartment building, shabby on the outside but famous among rich Moscovites and apparently sporting a tasteful interior. Boims had to look good to their relatives, as Sim did to his theater troupe, all which were coming, Ilinichna including.

"Yeah, I thought so." Pavlik sighed. "Me too. I just hope mama and papa don't freak out too much and won't throw a scene, you know what I mean?" Pavlik leaned to Irka, she tied his tie, he kept inspecting it in the mirror. "By the way, Sim is planning quite an entrance. He kept grilling me on who is

coming, if your mother is coming, your relatives and whatnot. I think he plans to impress them."

Irka raised a brow, passing the iron over her finger and jerking it away. Outside early spring sun shone on the grubby melting mess left from the winter.

"I think he plans to come dressed as The Raven. That mask he got. He told me. How cool is that?" Pavlik smiled, excitement spilling from him like sunshine.

Irka shrugged, her thoughts far away from the matter of clothes. It was funny to her how Pavlik, despite his knowledge of what horrible disaster might happen, believed like the rest of his family that Lyosha wouldn't attempt anything foolish in front of so many people, so many witnesses, drunk or not, and that there would be enough men to overpower and stop him. She didn't trust any of it. Her long life of endurance taught her to be ready for the worst when life presented its rosy side, wanting to fool you and tripping your legs at the last second, having a laugh at your expense.

"You think he'll dare to harm you? You really think he is that kind of an idiot? I beg to differ."

Irka gave him the look.

"Seriously. I would put it out of your mind, if I were you. Let this be a merry day, okay, for all of us, for you, for your baby." Pavlik almost whined.

Irka nodded and proceeded to the next task. She hung up her coat, took Yulia's curling iron and stuck a strand of her mousy hair between blades, waiting by the mirror. There wasn't much hair to curl to begin with. She inherited it from her mother, limp and lifeless and dull no matter how many times washed.

"Hey, look at me, please." Said Pavlik's voice.

Irka stubbornly let out a warm strand of hair that immediately began straightening, and clapped in the next one.

"Irina, please. I need to ask you something."

Irka reluctantly found Pavlik's eyes in the mirror.

"Can you do me a favor?" He added.

Irka shrugged. What could he possibly ask of her now, when everything was decided and only awaited execution? He was going to leave her, she had no place to live after, her plan was to check in herself in the hospital, lying that she was in pain, to see if she could score time there until the baby was born and maybe by then something would shake loose.

"Listen. I understand your worry, believe me, I do. I can't *possibly* imagine what it would feel like, being homeless. But, imagine this, I think I have a plan, I'm working on something. It's a... I wanted to keep it a surprise, but you're so gloomy, so..."

Irka perked up, questioningly.

"There you go. Now I got your attention. I'll tell you later, if you behave. All right?" He teased her. Irka tried really hard not to fall for it. "So this is what I would like to ask of you. I truly hope you can do it. I have faith in you, in fact. The deal its. Just for today, for this day, may I ask you to let go? Just. Let go? Enjoy it, you know, have fun? Forget about everything else." Pavlik straightened his tie once more, looking Irka over.

She took her time to react, taking him in.

He was dressed immaculately, young and preppy in that dark suit, one handsome devil to break girls' hearts wherever he went, not caring for one of them, his eyes set on John, heart on poor Kostik, future plans on Sim. Nowhere was there place for Irka and her baby. She would have her memories left, memories and the promise of letters, if he didn't forget about her, being swept into America, enthralled by the newness of it, and the wonder, and the beautiful people who lived there, people like John, with perfect teeth, perfect hair and skin, perfect health, perfect everything.

Pavlik tried again. "I promise nothing bad will happen today. Do you hear me? I promise. I have a good feeling about this. We have to be granted one good day, don't you think? After what has befallen us, there is bound to be at least one good one?"

Yeah, right. Granted by whom? Thought Irka, looking at him, shaking her head at his naiveté, and scared by her own cynicism. By some dude in the clouds old babushkas call God and bow to him and cross themselves, all the while living in poverty and claiming he loves them? If he existed and, indeed, if he loved them, he would've made sure they had enough money for food, right? Or do you mean granted by our government, by president Yeltsin who can't say two words straight, making an effort and calling all alcoholics and murderers and other criminals to pause for a day so poor Pavel Boim and Irina Marinova could have a jubilant wedding? Or maybe you mean, by communism? By the universe? By whom?

Irka scoffed.

"Please. I'm asking you to. I know it's hard, but for once, can you simply enjoy yourself, be with me, in the moment, with us, for us? How else can I convince you?" He held her face, and Irka concentrated all her willpower on not breaking down right then and there.

"Listen. I love you." Pavlik exhaled, kissing her lips.

Nice try. Irka disentangled, listing back and slamming into the mirror. There was nowhere else to retreat. She forgot about the curler and yanked it down, air filling with the smell of singed hair.

"You don't believe me, do you? You've been violated your entire life and you find it hard to believe that someone actually loves you?"

Why? Irka formed with her lips. Why me? What for? I'm ugly. I'm not Kostik, look at me, I'm a girl! You're gay! Have you somehow forgotten that insignificant detail? Can't you see my ass, my boobs? I'm not your type. You don't love me. You think you do, but you don't. You said you can't love me the way I want you to, so don't you start-

Pavlik took her hand. "Irina. I know what you're thinking. I know what I said, but I do, I do love you. I can't explain how it works, maybe it's something they say is made in heaven or whatever. Okay, that sounds cheesy. Forget it. I don't know. It's not physical, like, I don't desire you, but I want to be with you, all the time. I don't care how it's called, okay? I don't care! To me it's love. How else do you want me to prove it. Die for you or something?" He laughed, attempting to lighten the mood.

Irka's heart dropped, then returned with a throbbing pain inside, horror flooding her at the idea. She shook her head vigorously.

"Then, please, let go." He twirled her curled hair on his finger. "If you love me." He waited, knowing he won.

Irka froze.

"Do you love me?"

She nodded, feeling stabbed. She was a balloon of angry feelings that planned to burst, but somehow Pavlik managed to deflate her, gradually, and she could feel poison leaving her, tension dissolving, her mind agreeing with him, that yes, just this once, everything was going to be all right. She clamped her right hand into a fist, feeling the paper ring with her thumb.

"If you want to know the truth..." Began Pavlik, looking past her. "I'm scared, very scared of leaving you. I grew fond of you, your constant presence, your... silence even. It's not really silence, it's... I don't know, I can hear you thinking. You're always there for me when I need you, always ready to listen. I'll miss you, Irina, I'll miss you terribly." He said with a sigh, and then added suddenly. "Will you come with me to Kostik's grave? Before I leave? I'm kind of terrified about losing it, and, well, it'd be great to have you there and..."

Irka nodded, promising with her eyes to do anything he wanted, yielding to her yearning, succumbing to this pitiful begging of a puppy that's about to be left on the street and is trying to lick the hand of the one tossing it.

The door creaked open and Yulia's pampered head poked in. "The car is here. You ready yet or not?"

Chapter 59. The Ceremony

They filed outside, wind ruffling their hair, and seated in the black long *Chaika*, the driver merrily wishing them long life together and taking off. Irka twirled her head out of custom, watching for black cars, until Pavlik intercepted her searching and reminded her about her promise. Irka had to consciously work at it, but after the taxi driver told them how he proposed to his wife of forty years when she milked a cow, how she jumped, how the cow got so scared it kicked the bucket and ran berserk, Irka laughed despite herself and was astounded at the sound.

She couldn't remember the last time she laughed.

The boxy tomb of the department of public services, ZAGS for short, was stuffed with couples, girls sheathed in frilly concoctions more garish than Irka's, which contributed to her feeling better, guys decked out in suits, guests sporting red sashes across their chests, gold letters spelling out 'honored witness', numerous relatives filing in and out, some drunk already, with flowers, children in tow, or elderly parents. Irka felt a pang of jealousy, watching others being surrounded with friends, 'witnesses' especially, those married friends who stood by for the groom and the bride to witness their union. Irka had

no girlfriends to invite, and Pavlik refused to invite anyone. He said if he did invite someone, it would be Kostik, and yelled at Yulia to leave him alone.

The din of people merged into an almost visible cloud, hitting Irka as soon as they entered. They took a seat at the bench, waiting for their names to be announced, for their turn on the conveyor of marriage, the door opening, welcoming a couple, spitting them out not ten minutes later, then next, then next, Irka soaking in the reality of what was happening to her to the point of forgetting that her own family was due to arrive soon, noticing them too late, Lenchka running up first.

"Irkadura!" She announced loudly.

"Shush. Shut your mouth. Think what you say." Hissed Sonya from behind her, immediately switching from scary to hospitable. "Irka, look at you! Getting married, who would've thought. Come here, give your auntie a hug and a kiss. Go on, get your fat lazy ass up. You can do it." With her usual brashness, she swept Irka into an overly perfumed hold.

"Oy! My granddaughter! Oy, was just this little, just this. Oy. I don't recognize you, don't recognize you." Valya laughed, jerking back her head and exposing golden teeth, making Irka cringe, then slobbering all over her with kisses, then proceeding to administer the same to polite Pavlik, who winked at Irka, reminding her to have fun.

And she did. She smiled.

Despite the rather cold exchange between Boims and Marinovas, she smiled. She smiled at Nadezhda's stern blabbering about young men these days and how she better watch out so that he won't cheat on her. She endured her mother's slurry tirade on her daughter being a gift, such a talented and extraordinary girl she was, Marina knew from the moment she laid eyes on her, saying she must've inherited this talent from her father who should've been an actor, who, as far as Irka knew, worked as a construction worker, laying bricks. Irka wasn't even disappointed that her mother was already drunk, that she came up to her last, that she didn't compliment on her dress or hair or anything of the sort, that she didn't properly greet Yulia or Anton or anyone for that matter, sprawling on the nearest bench like she owned the place.

Pavlik's request took hold of Irka. This was going to be a great day. She was going to remember it for the rest of her life. She didn't have a single doubt about it.

"Your mother could've at least apologized to us, you know." Yulia, as if she read Irka's thoughts, whispered in her ear.

Irka smiled.

"Forgive me for saying this, and, trust me, I have given it my utmost consideration, before voicing my concern to you, especially in the view of the happy day that it is today, but if

that type, that despicable vile man shows up today, I will personally call militsiya and have him reported." Said Anton quietly into Irka's other ear, apparently in a mood too good to be straightforward.

Irka still smiled.

"Papa, mama, I love you both, dearly, but if I might remind you. This is our day, okay? We'd appreciate it if you were nice to us, well, as nice as you possibly can be." Said Pavlik gallantly, kissing one, then the other parent.

Under the scrutiny of guests and in the close proximity of other people getting married, Yulia and Anton could only glare.

"Don't look at me like you're attending my funeral." Joked Pavlik.

"That's funny! Dead groom! Dead groom! Irkadura married a dead groom!" Lenchka screamed, dancing around.

Sonya smacked her forehead, and both Valya and Nadezhda joined in giving the little girl hideous reprimands, bringing her to tears. Marina laughed so loud, she slipped off the bench, to stern glances from the nearby couple.

Irka kept smiling.

Boims recovered from the initial shock.

"Pavlusha!" Exclaimed Yulia. "We talked about this a million times, da? It's bad luck saying these words, very bad luck. Now, if I recall—"

But whatever it is Yulia recalled, Irka didn't catch. A loud voice announced them, and they were ushered into a vast bare hall with a massive desk at the end of it, and a massive woman in front, same shape as the desk, only slightly more vertical. She fit the interior with her hideous skirt-suit very well, matching a couple Russian flags, gaudy curtains and rug at her feet. The overall color theme was that rare pink that makes you want to puke, wallpaper included.

At least it's not orange, thought Irka.

Both families nudged them gently forward.

"The Civil Registry Office of the city of Moscow greets you." Started the woman in a dull monotone, like she was bored out of her mind. "Respected Pavel and Irina. Today is the day of your marriage. In this large and complicated world you have found each other to become the most cherished people in each other's lives." The speech was clearly designed to bring joy, but the way it was delivered, Irka thought they could skip to the yes-or-no part. She didn't have to wait long.

It was a no nonsense, no romanticism of any kind ceremony, with the dull ZAGS *tetka* asking Pavlik and Irka if they wanted to marry, to which Pavlik said 'yes', and Irka nodded, causing a slight confusion, until Anton marched up to the woman and whispered something in her ear.

"She's mute! Wouldn't talk. Slap her, yell at her, no good. I tried everything. She been like this since little." Yelled Marina and hiccupped.

There were harsh whispers and tousling.

Irka purposefully didn't look and kept on smiling.

Nonplussed, *tetka* droned on. She then painstakingly recited the codex of marriage of Russian Federation and called for the bride and the groom to come up to her desk. Pavlik and Irka signed the marriage certificate in four places with golden pens that wouldn't work at first.

Tetka listed, throwing a furtive look at Irka's belly, and motioned them to stand, announcing them husband and wife.

They were supposed to be presented the rings on a little decorative pillow, but Pavlik said he had something else in mind, angering Margarita for breaking the tradition. They all waited with abated breath, watching.

Pavlik took out the rings from his pocket. "Made it myself." He whispered, sliding a wide flat band on her finger, an exact copy of the paper ring that, despite Irka's best efforts, started falling apart and she was forced to stop wearing it. It had words engraved along its circumference, on both inner and outer side, *I love you I love you I love you I love you*.

"Talked papa into helping me, he wasn't pleased." Whispered Pavlik, putting it on.

Irka stared at it, her heart breaking into a million pieces, then reassembling itself within seconds, so that she couldn't hear anything else he said, taking a plain identical band from his hand and slipping it on his finger. Her hands shook and she kept missing it, finally succeeding on the third try.

Tetka told them to congratulate each other, and Pavlik performed his feat, leaning Irka on his arm and pretending to kiss her passionately, only suddenly they were kissing for real, to the scratchy march of Mendelssohn, and Marina cried loudly, and everyone started clapping, and sniffing, and *tetka* kept droning on her dull congratulations and more marriage codex and the date and shoved a big red smelly fake-leather bound folder with the certificate into their hands and it all went blurry in Irka's vision.

She was gone.

She entered an alternate reality called happiness, the closest to which she ever experienced was holding the very first puppy their dogs *Kesha* and *Kasha* produced, *Kasha* licking it off, and Irka picking it up and holding it to her chest under the kitchen table, for maybe a few minutes, before Valya yanked it out of her hands and drowned it in the bucket of water. Irka

felt like that puppy right now, naïve, blissful, not knowing that soon, abruptly, her happiness will end.

By tradition, Pavlik should've carried her out out of the building, over the threshold and down the steps, but she was too heavy for him to lift so he simply led her by the hand. She walked in a fog, seated in the *Chaika*, watched buildings and cars and people whiz past, got out of the car, let Pavlik kiss her for a picture, got back into the car, dimly witnessing the passage of time. She thought her feet deserted her, unable to understand how her legs functioned, and only found the feeling return to her body on the insistence of her bladder. She had to pee, bad.

They stopped again, walked out into the observation point by the Moscow State University, overlooking the city and the stadiums from a wide marble podium, and Irka rushed to the line of porta-potties, competing with other brides trying to stuff their massive skirts inside to take a piss. It was a Saturday and this popular spot was full of newlyweds who stopped to take pictures. Everyone did everything on the same schedule. Saturdays were marrying days, Sundays were drinking days, Mondays were hangover days.

After peeing Irka felt glorious, smiling through hushed bickering in the car concerning Anton's worries about the dinner and Yulia's annoyance at him getting on her nerves because she

was concerned as well, Margarita chiming in, explaining her hip pain and where it originated, and Pavlik blissfully ignoring them, deliberately grinning.

They held hands, holding on to each other, because there was nobody else to hold on to for either of them. Irka kept fingering the ring, deciding no matter how poor she got, no matter what happened, she wouldn't sell it for the life of her.

The driver parked *Chaika* in front of an old apartment building on some nice looking boulevard lined with linden trees. An indiscreet staircase led a few steps up, with only a sign indicating that this was not another *pod'yezd* but a restaurant entrance. It said *Apelsin* and had a pointed arrow. There was already a crowd in front, gathered for greeting the newlyweds.

"Why, finally! There they are! My sugar kittens! We thought you eloped! Congratulations, congratulations! Get out, let me take a look at you." A large shape in a mask of a raven flapped its arms, the entire theater troupe behind it, all properly made up and in costumes. The voice was clearly Sim's, and yet he spoke in an exaggerated manner, as if aiming at being unrecognizable or overly dramatic.

"Sim!" Called Pavlik, helping Irka out of the car. "I thought you said you'd come to the ceremony, I thought..."

"My most sincere apologies, honey bun, got delayed. Irina! Come here, let me tell you everything about this scoundrel here

you just married." He scooped her into a hug and gave her kisses on each cheek. Irka hugged him back awkwardly, holding on to Pavlik's hand with her iron grip.

A taxi piled up after them and Marinova women hastily made their way out, joining the crowd.

Sim let go and waved. "Let them through! Let them through!" His voice rung above people's heads. They parted in the wake of the couple, and Irka stepped in rhythm with Pavlik, savoring every moment, willing herself to record everything. She positively hovered above the ground, making it to the landing, turning one last time to soak in the atmosphere, the street, the laughing merry faces, the honks of passing cars, the flowers, the spring sun hanging low, the smell of the melting snow, the slush of it under moving tires, the passersby craning their necks, two of them in black berets, the familiar black car parked right across the street—

Irka jerked her head around. Her stomach flooded with ice. She looked back again and they were gone. She must have hallucinated, it was just her paranoia acting up again. Besides, they got their money, what would they want with them now anyway? Attempt to hurt Pavlik? Surrounded by so many people? He was safe, safe.

Irka stole a glance at him. He beamed, haven't noticed a thing. Irka fingered the knife in her coat for assurance that it was still there and they disappeared behind restaurant doors.

Chapter 60. The Wedding Dinner

It smelled wonderful inside, of freshly made stew, and baked pastries, and pies, and spilled champagne. The chef himself greeted them with two crystal flutes, filling them with bubbly goodness, offering them to the newlyweds. Irka took hers with shaking hands and gulped it, wincing at the bubbles, wishing for the carelessness to return, but it got spoiled. It got spoiled further by someone taking off her coat and carrying it away despite her mute protests. Both her and Pavlik were almost dragged into a huge dinner hall.

Irka's knees threatened to buckle as she entered.

"What is it? Something wrong?" Asked Pavlik finally after he noticed that she didn't move. He looked around, following her gaze. "You don't like it? I thought it's quite tasteful, no?" As always, he almost guessed the cause of her distress. Almost.

"Go on, go on, take a seat!" A voice shouted from behind.

"We're starving here!" Picked up another.

"Don't make us shout *gorko*, naughty kids!" There was laughter, and more jeering and prodding and ululating, mostly coming from the actors. Boim relatives smiled politely and studied their surroundings, nodding appreciatively at expensive

rugs, shiny curtains gathered masterfully over large windows, large table covered in a starched cloth, an array of dishes and flowers on top, chairs surrounding it, waiting.

"He doesn't know how to kiss a girl, that's what he's afraid of!" Shouted Katya's shrill voice, a bit tipsy, and was picked up by John. "What? What's that? What did you say?"

Pavlik flinched at his voice a little, Irka noticed dimly, but she was too deep in her memories to notice his overall distress at seeing both John and Sim and acting like he didn't care, like his full attention was on his new wife.

Irka started trembling lightly.

"Irina, what's going on?" He leaned to her, a trifle irritated, his face flushed from alcohol.

Irka swiveled her eyes from window to Pavlik, to window, to Pavlik.

"Is something the matter?" Somebody said, and people started surrounding them.

Pavlik's face lost color as he understood what stopped Irka in her tracks. "Oh God, oh no, I forgot, I completely forgot! They're orange..."

"What's orange?" Asked Yulia. "Come on. You are blocking the guests. Now, you will sit down and feel better. How about maybe some water?"

"Mama, you don't understand!"

Anton added something, Sim interrupted, Marina shouted, Lenochnka giggled, Sonya snapped, even Ilinichna voiced her opinion, coming late, apologizing, trying to get through to take a closer look, claiming she knew everything about this girl better than anyone else.

Irka didn't hear any of it, staring at the curtains. They weren't the exact same orange of the curtains in the Marinova apartment, but the way they folded, the way they hung, the way the breeze ruffled them paralyzed her.

"What's the holdup?" Yelled Marina. "Take him, daughter, lead him, he's yours to lead now!" She cackled, and Irka thought she would vomit, her stomach shrinking, her baby kicking swiftly into it, fidgety, as if it got unhappy, as if it sensed the agitation.

"Shut up, all of you!" Pavlik suddenly yelled. That caused a shocked pause, in the middle of which he leaned to Irka. "I'm sorry, Irina, I didn't know. Really, I had no idea. I'm seeing this place for the first time myself. Hey, how about this. You can close your eyes, if you want. I will lead you. How does that sound?" He offered quietly. "We don't have to stay here long, either, we'll just eat dinner and be off, is that okay? Think you can do it?"

"Need help?" Whispered Sim nearby.

"No, it's fine, we're fine. Thank you." Said Pavlik, waiting for Irka's answer.

"Do we need to call a doctor?" Said Anton.

"Papa, get out of her face. Please, give her a minute." Pavlik shielded Irka.

"My baby! My baby! Something wrong with my baby?"

"Oy. What's wrong?"

There were more shouts.

Irka covered her ears, sucking in air, willing herself to calm down.

"You sure you want to go through with this?" Pavlik's voice enveloped her, and she grabbed on to it, for sanity, stubbornly nodding. This was a happy day, he asked her for it to be happy, she promised, she would do her best to make it such. She took a deep breath, and another, and another, and moved forward without looking up, concentrating on moving her feet, pulling out a chair at the head of the table and sinking into it.

"Its okay, everything is okay! Irina just needs to take it easy. We had a busy morning. Please, sit." Called out Pavlik.

And they did. Boims sat on Pavlik's side, on the left, their multiple relatives right after, both Anton and Yulia quietly talking to them, helping them settle in, and the wild bunch, the Marinova women, Sim and the actors on the right, on Irka's side, cheering, whistling, whooping, purposefully trying

to get the mood back to merry, loudly demanding that the first toast would be made for the bride and groom so they could finally watch them kiss since they missed the marriage ceremony.

"Excuse me, excuse me, may I have everyone's attention?"

Anton tinkled on his glass, standing.

Guests hushed, studying him.

"Well, this is a big day for us. I'm very glad you all came. Very glad. I wanted to thank you for gathering here to celebrate this important occasion, the joining of our families, the creation a brand new family. For this, I'd like to propose a toast." He nodded at everyone, waiting for people to hush completely.

Pavlik glanced at Irka. She forced herself to smile.

"If I may... oh, this is difficult." He took off his glasses, cleaned them with a kerchief, and put them back on. "This here is, as you all know, Pavel, Pavlusha, our beloved Pavlusha, our only son, our pride, our joy, our..." His chin jittered slightly. "Our blood. And now we give him away into the hands of Irina here, a beautiful young woman. And you, Marina Andreevna," he motioned to her, "are giving away your daughter into the hands of my son."

"That's right, I am." Confirmed Marina.

"Irina, Pavel." Anton raised the glass higher. "We hope you take care of each other, we hope... We wish you love, health, and

prosperity." He gulped, veins on his neck stood out a bit, and he propped his glasses. "May your child have happy and loving parents. To the newlyweds!" He raised the glass, saying that last bit quickly, as if the whole speech made him uncomfortable.

People stormed up, pouring each other champagne from bottles dispersed around the table, carelessly, some of it spilling.

"To the newlyweds! To the newlyweds!"

They reached over the table, clinked the glasses, and watched Pavlik and Irka expectantly, who stood and began downing their drinks, serving as a signal to everyone else.

"Gorko!" Shouted Ilinichna.

"Oy, *gorko, gorko, very gorko!*" Picked up Valya, opening her mouth wide in mock distaste.

"Gorko!" Marina was next, then Sonya, and even Lenchka chimed in. Sim's voice overpowered the rest, deep and throaty, finally merging with those of Anton and Yulia and actors. John tried saying it too, with an accent, then gave up, looking longingly at Pavlik, who pretended not to see, studying Irka. "You okay?"

Irka made herself smile affirmatively.

"You sure? The curtains don't bother you anymore?"

She shook her head.

"Horosho." Pavlik beamed. "Let's show them how it's done." And off they were kissing again, without pretense, him holding Irka gingerly, the way one would hold a glass balloon, afraid to break it. The racket around them escalated, spurring them to go on longer, somebody starting to count. Irka lost herself in the scent of Pavlik's skin, passing her hand through his hair, again and again, slowly relaxing.

The table buzzed with excitement, if not for John who abruptly stood and stormed out, bewildered Katya on his heels.

Pavlik strained to pretend he didn't notice.

Sim jumped up, wishing them both a happy marriage, which in turn would benefit his theater greatly, as well as provide them both with steady income. "You see, sweetness birds, you do well, I do well, the theater does well, we all do well, don't we?" He cackled loudly, and Marina gave him a strange look, then joined in on the laughter. "Am I right, Anton?" he lifted the flute. "To love! To young untainted love! May you have an abundance of it!"

"Damn right you are!" Picked up Marina, standing. "This is my daughter here, see? My daughter. My baby. My angel! You know what? I'm proud of her. Young mother. See her belly? There is a baby there, an innocent angel, a..." She hiccupped. The table went a bit quiet.

"Sit!" Hissed Nadezhda at her.

"Marina, *dura*, sit, mama said." Chimed in Valya, red-faced from champagne.

"Oh, but mama! There are so many things I want to say!" Marina suddenly began to wail, loudly, taking the noise up a level with each gulp of air. People looked at each other, unsure how to react.

Irka suddenly saw herself in the mirror, in how Valya yanked on Marina's sleeve, angry, a side she rarely showed, always so meek and servile in front of other people.

"I'm very sorry, but can I ask you to do something for me? I'd appreciate it if you restrained your daughter, if I may be so bold to request that." Irka overheard Yulia whispering across the table at Valya, barely moving her lips.

"Why do you say this? Who are you to say this? She is happy for her baby!" Snarled Valya back, brave for once under the influence of alcohol.

Boim relatives segregated into clusters, whispering among themselves, sniggering, pointing.

Irka, her head already reeling, reached for the nearby champagne bottle, poured herself more and downed it without a blink before anyone could stop her.

"Pavel, such a handsome young man!" Marina continued, recovering. "Took my baby in! My pr—" She cursed as Valya did something to her under the table.

"Something tastes funny. Something in my mouth. I feel *gorko* again!" Boomed Sim, to camouflage the awkwardness.

The actors joined in. "*Gorko! Gorko!*"

John, a jacket in his hands, poked his head in between doors, causing Pavlik to half-stand, then sit back down.

While he was distracted, Irka, without a blink, doused another glass of champagne, sensing her vision blur at the edges.

John stormed out, Katya hanging on him, the usual.

Pavlik snapped out of it, staring at Irka. "Whoa, hey, stop. You'll get drunk in no time. Hold on there."

Irka reached for the bottle again.

"Irina. No! Do you hear me? She's only embarrassing herself. They all are." Tried Pavlik. "It'll be okay, everything will be okay. Just ignore them. They're a bunch of unhappy people who are trying to have fun their own miserable way, okay? Remember, it's our day, *our* day. You promised."

They did more kissing, growing into the role. More toasts were spoken. Waiters started bringing in dishes, something wrapped in foil in the shape of ducks, with bent necks, then salads and cut up cold meats and cheeses, and Irka wondered how much all of this cost the Boims and how her mother nearly spoiled it with her big mouth. After a while she stopped wondering about anything, giving in to feeling warm and happy

and tipsy, watching people stuff their faces with food and gulp vodka. She thought, what could they possibly do to her now, if everyone found out Pavlik wasn't the father? Everyone must have known already, just covering it up very well.

Sim played the *tamada*, entertaining everyone, cracking jokes, directing his troupe to perform, getting so much into character, he attempted to climb on top of the table and dance, being pulled down just in time. "I have important news to announce!" He shouted, a bit slurry. "Listen up, everyone! My theater got invited to perform on Broadway, and, dear Irina, if I may steal your husband, I'm talking him with me to feel it out, before having everyone join us for..." He swirled around, tossing his scarf, "...a tour in America!"

There was deafening shouting at this, actors jumping up and reaching to hug Sim, nearly toppling him over, and Anton and Yulia struck, staring, slowly turning their heads to Pavlik and back.

"What is this tour thing, son?" Anton tried to overpower the racket.

"Is this something you knew and didn't tell us about, Pavlusha?" Chimed in Yulia.

"Mama, papa, relax. We wanted to keep it a secret because until yesterday Sim wasn't sure. Isn't that right, Sim?"

Sim shouted his agreement.

Yulia swiftly made her way over. "I presume you knew this all along?" She stared Irka down.

Irks shrugged.

"Hold on. What are you saying? You're leaving my daughter to give birth to the baby alone?" Marina slurred. "Oh, you scoundrel. I'll show you." She stood, swaying.

Valya yanked on her arm.

They were about to shout at each other, but a sudden change in the air caused them to stop and to look around. Hush rolled over the dinner hall in a wave coming from the two front doors.

Flowers in one hand, a bottle of vodka in another, relatively groomed and wavering only a little, there stood Lyosha Ivanenko, grinning.

Chapter 61. Lyosha's Return

Irka's spine turned into a nail and pinned her to the chair. Pavlik clasped her by the shoulders. She could hear his heartbeat. The silence around them swelled and broke into waves of whispering, those who didn't know who it was asked those who knew, shaking heads, brandishing fingers, looking at Irka, then at Lyosha, then at Marina, then at each other again.

"Here you are then, eh? Couldn't have picked a worst place for a wedding. Took me forever to find you." Lyosha croaked, giggling a little. "Sorry I'm late. Had to—" he lifted both arms, "—buy flowers and whatnot, right? To be proper. Parent. To the bride and the groom." He snarled that last word, staring at Pavlik, then at Irka, passing his piggy eyes over the table.

Anton swiftly stood, his hands shaking a little, his face chalky. "Pardon me, but this is a private event. I don't recall inviting you. Out you go."

"Antosha!" Yulia tugged on his sleeve.

He shook her off. "Did you hear what I said? Please vacate the premises, before I call militsiya."

"Why so angry? I don't mean no harm, I came to congratulate my daughter here." Lyosha took a step forward, a murderous look on his face.

Women shrunk, waiting for a reaction from the men. Men looked at each other, waiting for one of them to make a move, unsure if this was an invitation for a fight, or who it was, standing in front of them, claiming Irina Marinova, the bride, was his daughter.

Irka flinched, breath rattled out of her chest. She shouldn't have let them take her coat, she should've told Pavlik about the black car and guys in black berets, she should've this, she should've that. She thought it was her fault somehow he found them. A bad feeling spread in the pit of her stomach. Without lowering her eyes, she walked her fingers to the dull knife she was using and curled fingers around it.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, please! Spare me the bullshit." Boomed Sim, diverting attention to himself and nodding to Anton. "She is not your daughter, so this whole sorry father thing is not going to work, you know it. Who do you think you are? Whatever gives you the right to barge in on people celebrating, uninvited? Do you need me to show you the way out, or are you intelligent enough to find it yourself?" Sim stood, leaning on the table.

Anton began to make his way around.

"Kolya, can you go with Anton Borisovich, please? Boys? We need to remove this man from the premises." Sim motioned to a couple actors, who, confused, nonetheless obliged.

"Look at that clown. What's wrong with your face? Who the fuck are you?" Lyosha took a step forward.

Marina shrieked, apparently having slumped into a semi-doze and only now realizing who stood in the doors of the restaurant.

"Militsiya! I'm calling militsiya!" Screamed Anton.

The guests gawked, unsure what to do, and, in a way, enjoying the unfolding show with some morbid curiosity.

Yulia rushed to her son's side. "Pavlusha, quick. Militsiya will deal with it."

"Mama, I can't leave Irina alone, let go! Have you forgotten what he did to her, have you?" He looked angry.

Yulia balked, hurt. "I meant both of you."

"We need to get you out of here." Whispered Pavlik into Irka's ear, lifting her. She pulled herself up, reluctantly, and they began edging around the table.

Angry murmurs broke out. Guests began standing up.

"Lyosha! Lyosha, where have you disappeared?" Marina hiccupped, making her way over.

He threw her a look of pure loathing. "Out of my way, whore." And pushed her rudely aside. Marina gasped, bending. Valya came to her aid.

Lyosha turned around like nothing happened. "Hey! Where ya going? I have presents for you here, see? Hold up." He leered, stumbling to Irka and Pavlik.

Pavlik's palm turned sweaty. Irka squeezed her fingers tight over the knife. They had two choices, either dart around him and go for the door, or get back behind the table, hoping he wouldn't do anything stupid.

Enraged, the lower part of his face that was visible turning purple, Sim blocked Lyosha, towering above, the beak of his raven mask nearly touching his forehead. "Lyosha Ivanenko, right? Is that your name, swine? Well, listen to me, either you leave on your own free will, or I will help you leave. Your choice. However, I would appreciate it if you didn't make any fuss."

"Oh yeah? Who are you to tell me what to do, you fucking clown?" Lyosha reached and snatched the mask off Sim's face, throwing it on the floor.

Sim staggered back, disoriented.

"Aha! Surprise!" Lyosha exclaimed. "If it isn't the famous di-rector himself."

Marina gasped, then hiccupped, then said slowly and clearly, as if she miraculously sobered up. "Oh God. Oh my God. The eyes. Those eyes, I'd recognize them everywhere. Mama, look! It can't be. Can it? Gerasim?"

Sim turned to her, failing to control himself, answering to his name automatically.

"Gerasim! It is you. What did you do to your face? Gerasim! My Gerasim!" Marina staggered to him, arms outstretched.

Sim covered his face.

There was a pause, then Ilinichna broke it. "See, I knew it. I knew it from the start. That's why he took her, good man, Sim Novy is, good man."

"Oy! Oy. Oy. What's happening. What's happening." Valya mumbled. "Gerasim. We thought you died. Oy."

"Son of a bitch." Spat Nadezhda, brandishing her stick at Sim. "Left my granddaughter pregnant! You son of a bitch!"

Irka stared at all of this unfolding, uncomprehending, her thinking clouded with alcohol, shifting eyes from Marina to Sim and back, as did the rest of the guests.

"I don't believe it." Said Pavlik in a dry raspy voice. "Sim? Is that true?" He turned to look at Irka.

"Yeah, Sim, what's that woman saying?" An actor picked up.

Gerasim Marinov. Thought Irka. Pavlik said Sim took a stage name. Gerasim. Sim. Marinov. Nov. Novy. It fit. His girth, thick

bones, broad shoulders, heavy muscles, the genes, the artistic talent, him caring for her, asking her about her mother, his shock at seeing her drunk at Boim's apartment, him wearing the mask at the celebration dinner, at the theater, anywhere where Marina could recognize him. Him leaving her. Him being gay. Him...

It clicked in Irka's head, and she issued a sort of a moan.

But how could it be? He's all over the place, she thought. His portrait is on the façade of the theater, he's written about in newspapers, interviewed on television, he's...

"He's got these scars on the bottom of his chin." Pavlik whispered to Irka, sensing what she thought. "I asked him, when, well... One night. He said he was in an accident, back when he worked as a brick layer, had to completely reconstruct his face."

"Those eyes! My Gerasim, I'd recognize your eyes anywhere! Oh, my Gerasim! Oh, why did you leave me?" Marina wailed.

Irka stared, feelings surging in her into an unrecognizable mess, and suddenly all she wanted to do was to beat them up, all of them, her mother, Lyosha, Sim, everyone.

"You, faggot, knocked up this whore? It was you? The director? Haha. Hahaha!" Lyosha cracked up, holding to his jiggling belly. "How did you get it up, eh? Show me the trick!"

He kept laughing, standing there in front of Sim, who held on to

his head, frozen like a statue, his artistic skill snuffed out but for a moment.

The actors who went with Anton to call militsiya returned, joined by the waiters, merging with the crowd, gawking at the unfolding drama, watching the famous director, waiting to see how he would react to the insult.

"Show me your cock, I want to see!" Yelled Lyosha, tears rolling down the sides of his cheeks. "Show me? I bet you haven't gotten one. I bet you have a pussy!"

Sim raised a fist and connected it with Lyosha's face, sending him flying to the floor with one heavy swipe, wincing, massaging his hand, soft and not fit for fighting.

Lyosha sprawled. The bottle of vodka in his hand crashed into a mess of liquid and glass fragments, causing waiters to leave and women to scream. People began making their way out.

"Stinking faggot. You will pay for this." Lyosha said slowly, scrambling up, and, without taking his eyes off Sim, charged, holding the broken bottle in front of him, glass teeth jutting out.

The spell was broken. There were shouts, "Get him, Sim!" and "Militsiya!" and "They're on their way!" and "Lyosha, no!" and more, bodies colliding into a mass of grunting, hitting, screaming, making it hard to see what was going on.

By some instinct that she couldn't explain, instead of running away, Irka rushed through the crowd, to Sim, knife in her hand, aiming to attack. She barely noticed that some kind of animal moan escaped her lips, that angry tears rolled down her cheeks, she only knew one thing. The moment came. She wanted to hurt Lyosha, hurt him bad, she didn't know how, but she knew she would, of that she was certain. And she was done waiting, done hiding, done being scared. She was going to hurt him now.

"Irina, no!" Pavlik shouted, yanking on her skirt, and then, without being able to stop her, stepped on it.

Irka flailed her arms and began falling, seeing everything in slow motion, despite it happening very fast. Lyosha changed his course and veered left, stooping low, jutting out his hand with the jagged bottle so it aimed at her belly, if she were to fall on it. Sim swiped at him and missed. Marina grabbed his shoulders, but only managed to change his trajectory, pushing him forward instead of back, and Pavlik... One second Pavlik was to Irka's right, and now he was in front of her, shielding her, pushing her to the left, spreading out his arms, and falling, falling right on Lyosha. Lyosha's hand connected with him, there being a sharp intake of air, and then they toppled on the floor together, Lyosha's head hitting the floor with a crack, Pavlik on top of him, pinning him with his weight.

There was the sound of breaking glass, and then the room went deathly quiet.

From her position on the floor, Irka was the first to see what happened. Lyosha's eyelids fluttered and closed, and Pavlik made strange swiping motions with his arms, like he was swimming, dark blood gushing out of his neck, broken pieces of glass sticking out of it. Irka blinked. Her heart left her. It broke off, leaving only a void, a gap of excruciating pain. With inhuman effort, her belly tugging down, she lifted herself on all four and vaulted to Pavlik, a strange scream parting her lips and filling the room, echoing across the walls, overpowering shouts, covering Yulia's shrieks and Anton's yells and Sim's gasp and Marina's wailing, louder, louder, until she made it to him, lifting his face in her hands, watching his eyes, focusing on her for a second, then glassing over, blood pulsing out of him in rhythmic gushes, making her fingers sticky and slippery, soaking Lyosha's shirt, blooming on her wedding dress, staining it red.

People screamed behind her, hands tugged on her, someone tried lifting her, someone tried turning Pavlik over, pull Lyosha from under him, but Irka wouldn't let go. She hollered, tossing her head up, like a wolf to the moon, with the force of all these years that she was quiet, scaring those around her after they realized she couldn't be moved. She hollered until

her voice cracked from strain, until she didn't have enough breath, and only then did she lower her head and the first thing she saw and heard was her mother.

"Lyosha? Lyosha? What did he do to you. Are you alive? Lyosha, my Lyosha, answer me. Lyosha. No, please, don't leave me. Don't leave your Marina." She shook his limp shape, and he grunted something, swapping at her like at an annoying fly, realizing a weight was on top of him, trying to wiggle out from under it.

Irka intercepted her mother's drunken gaze, that weak obedient whore who prostituted herself to any low scum she could find, letting them rob her, violate her, never having enough guts to stand up, taking out her anger, her frustration and hate on the one who was weaker than her, the one who couldn't shout at her or beat her, on her daughter.

Irka groaned.

"Che...?" Slurred Marina, staring at Irka's mouth. "What?"

It all rushed to Irka in a split second, that day, that sunny day when she was two, like nothing else around existed, only her and her mother, and the pot, the little pot she just got done peeing into, waddling over to the mattress, for panty pulling.

"Dua." She said, not knowing how. It burst from her on its own accord. She didn't know if she could roll the proper Russian

'r', she never tried. So she said the word again, tasting the sound. "Dura." It worked, like it's been waiting for her to say it all these years, waiting for the right moment.

"What did you say?" Said Marina, her eyes round.

"Dura." Repeated Irka, taking in the air. "Dura! Dura!" She took in more air and began screaming on repeat. "Dura! You stupid *dura!* You *dura, dura, dura!*"

She heard shouts, "Doctor! Somebody call the ambulance! We need a doctor!" and "He's bleeding!" and "Oh God, oh my God, he killed him!" and "My son!" and "Pavlusha!" and someone finally lifting her, prying her fingers from him, and still she shouted on repeat, as if a flood of words had been held back and now she couldn't have enough of it. She watched her mother's face turn sour and scrunch up and suddenly she started to cry, but Irka couldn't stop. She thrashed out of Sim's hold, because it was him who held her, and screamed, "Pavlik!" saying his name for the first time, falling to her knees, pushing Yulia and Anton aside, looking him in the face, searching his eyes, trying to see something in them, anything.

They were still.

Pavlik was gone.

Chapter 62. The Birth

Militsiya came twenty minutes later, together with the ambulance, startling everyone with loud sirens. Lyosha, groggy from hitting his head on the floor and horrified at what he did, was handcuffed, and driven away. Pavlik's body was cordoned off by a couple militants who interviewed terrified guests, waiting for the coroner to show up. And Irka, after Sim finally managed to drag her away and sit her on a chair, convulsed from waves of spasms, unable to see or hear anything else, finally being carried out on a stretcher and taken by the ambulance to the hospital. That night, after suffering nine agonizing hours of contractions, doctors trying to stop the labor, in the early hours of the morning, unable to dilate, slashed open from her vagina to her anus to let the baby through, Irka gave birth to a preemie boy.

Drugged and delirious, she woke up in the dark hospital room, alone, her breasts aching with milk, no baby at her side. After wandering the corridors for what seemed like forever, she finally figured out that it was the middle of the night and, being sent back to bed by the shift nurse, was told that her baby was held in the intensive care unit, on a different floor,

and she would see him when the doctor deemed it would be safe for her to do so.

Not allowed to hold the baby, Irka spent her days gazing at him through the window, watching him breathe, tubes sticking out of his tiny body this way and that, then she would return to her room and pump milk until her breasts were raw with blood, not stopping until they burned, punishing herself, giving herself bruises, crying over Pavlik. If only she didn't dash at Lyosha with that knife, if only she listened to him, if only. She contemplated trying to find a way to the hospital roof, but then dismissed the idea. She had a baby, she couldn't leave her baby without a mother, she had to keep living, she promised him, and she agonized over his name, because although she did tell Pavlik she'd name him Kostik, it simply didn't fit. Whenever she looked at him, so scrawny and yellowish, but with such a stubborn look on his face, this stubbornness to survive, she couldn't decide.

Irka had so much milk, nurses collected it and gave it to other babies, whose moms couldn't produce it. Irka hardly talked to any of the other girls she met at the cafeteria. Her room had only one bed, which was considered a luxury, and she later found out that Sim paid for it. She slowly healed from labor, unable to sit, either standing or lying down, and phoning everyone she could, to find out the news, from Boims to Marinovas to Sim to even Ilinichna at the theater, dialing every number she recalled

from memory, talking so fast, people barely understood her, asking her to slow down and repeat herself.

This is what she found out. Pavlik was laid to rest next to Kostik, like Sim said he jokingly told him he would love to, if they ever died together. Margarita, overwhelmed by what happened to her beloved grandson, had a heart attack shortly after the wedding and passed away. Yulia and Anton, devastated and unable to bear the grief, sold the apartment, gave Anton's jewelry business to his rival, Yasha, and immigrated to Israel via Italy, which they planned to do together with Pavlik after the wedding.

John went back to America, after telling Katya to leave him alone and that he was gay and played her, which Katya tearfully told the entire theater, Ilinichna including, but Sim... Sim didn't go. He stayed. He apologized to Irka for his absence, for leaving her mother, refusing to talk to her on the phone and writing her letters, saying he wanted to speak face to face, in the hope of being forgiven. Nadezhda and Valya were shattered by what Lyosha did, but Valya had an even bigger blow, because upon coming home Sonya and Marina had a fight, and Sonya took both dogs and three cats to the veterinary clinic and euthanized them, let the hedgehog and the rat out on the street, and left with Lenchka the same day to live with one of the men who courted her since high school, a poor artist with no money but

with lots and lots of huge oil paintings in his room in an old *kommunalka* on Arbat street.

And Marina... Marina, choking from excitement that her daughter could talk now, asking only briefly about the baby, talked nonstop, told Irka that Lyosha was sentenced to six years for murder, but that on his way from the court house to jail, when entering the militsiya bus, he was shot dead out of a passing black car, one of the militants was wounded, and that she was being dragged as a witness to court now, to testify about Lyosha's Russian National Unity job, to see if there was a connection, and that same night a nice man in a black coat and black beret showed up at her door and asked her to keep quiet, and that she invited him in for tea, and that he seemed very intelligent and stayed for a little longer, and they shared a bottle of vodka and—

Irka hung up, unable to listen anymore, breathing hard. Lyosha was dead. Dead. He was *dead*. He wasn't a threat anymore. She phoned Ilinichna to tell her the news, and it was Ilinichna and Sim who picked her up one month after Pavlik's death, on the day the doctor allowed her to hold the baby for the first time, giving instructions to her and to Sim in the waiting room, and to Ilinichna, on how to care for the baby, but Irka hardly listened.

"Hey there." She said to the baby. "Look at you."

Swaddled in a blanket so tight, only his tiny face showed, his eyes closed, he breathed quietly, his thin nostrils flaring up, his face round like Irka's, brows arched, giving him a very serious look, as if he'd seen plenty of life already and was brave enough to face more.

"Hey baby. How are you? It's your mama talking to you. Your *mama*." Said Irka. "Want me to tell you a story?" She talked and talked to him, talked and talked, while walking out of the hospital, and getting into Sim's car, and taking off, only briefly hearing something on the periphery of her senses.

"Going home? Or do you want to, maybe, swing by your mother's place? She was in no state to come pick you up, I'm sorry, sugar bird, Valya said she, well..."

"What a god awful woman!" Scoffed Ilinichna.

"Ilinichna, darling, I love you to death, but please shut up." Sim whined, fixing his scarf.

Irka concentrated on the transparent blue bow that held the blanket around her baby, and said, "Cemetery."

"What is it, sweetie?" Asked Sim.

"Before we go anywhere else, I want to go to the cemetery. I want to see Pavlik." She said, and, unable to hold herself back, rattled off more. "I want to stop by the store, to buy some flowers. Oh, and a vase. Does the grave has a vase?"

"Well, I—" Began Sim, getting the car in reverse.

"What do you need the vase for, honey? Forget them fresh flowers, some *durak* will steal them, let's buy a fake wreath." Put in Ilinichna. "Oh, look at you, you cutie." She cooed to the baby, who blissfully slept.

"No." Said Irka. "I want fresh flowers. And I want a vase. And I want, I want to go there right now, straight away. I don't want to stop by anywhere else. Can we just go, can we go right now?" She stumbled over her words, speaking fast.

"Whoa, whoa. Sure. We're going." Sim snickered, and they drove for another thirty minutes, Irka whispering to the baby everything she saw, telling him stories about the people who walked by, the clouds that floated in the sky, and what color they were, and what color the new leaves were, and where they were going, and why, and whom they were going to see, going as far as consulting with the baby what flowers to buy when they stopped by a subway station and walked up to a line of old *babushkas* selling flowers. They gave Irka strange looks, as she carried the baby from bouquet to bouquet, sniffing it, reporting to him what she saw, how it smelled, and asking him what he thought.

"Crazy, that one." Said one of them under her breath, counting money and giving Sim a bouquet of roses.

They spent another half an hour by a kiosk that sold all kinds of things made from glass, vases included, and Irka looked

at each of them for so long, Ilinichna started mumbling something along the lines that it was taking forever and was a waste of time, but Sim cut her short.

At last, vase and flowers in Sim's hands, Irka ahead of the pack, they marched through the gate by an old church and into the maze of pathways, badly asphalted, snaking between thick elms, deep into the cemetery, passing old stones and walking up to new ones, Irka looking back to Sim for directions, until they finally made it.

Two plain granite slabs stood next to each other, surrounded by a low ornate iron fence, both graves had dry bouquets of flowers on them.

Irka tried leaning to take off the flowers, but it was tricky, with the baby, and Ilinichna, irritated, snapped. "Stop this silliness. Give me the baby. I'll go take him for a walk. You stay here and do what you need to do." And she yanked him out of Irka's hold.

"Be careful, please. And don't open the flap, it's cold out. And don't shake him too much, you will wake him. And don't—"

"Shush." Said Ilinichna and was off, cooing happily, leaving Sim and Irka alone, standing in front of two faces chiseled in stone, Kostik's and Pavlik's, both smiling.

Irka placed the vase on the stone, ruffling the flowers so they looked fuller. "Pavlik, hi. I'm... I'm so sorry about everything. I'm sorry you died, it's my fault. Thank you. Thank you for saving my life. Mine and my baby's life. I'm, I love you so much, I miss you. It hurts, Pavlik, it hurts so bad. I couldn't come to the funeral, I was in the hospital, and, well..." She swallowed hard, mad at herself for falling apart so quickly.

"Irina, sweetness." Sim began uncertainly.

"What?" She blurted, wiping her nose.

"It's terrible, simply terrible, what happened, but it wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. It was! I was stupid, I was an idiot. I didn't listen to him. Why the hell did I have to attack Lyosha with that knife? It wasn't even sharp enough to do any kind of damage. I'm, I can't believe I did what I did. I wish I could turn it back, I wish I could reverse the time, I wish it never happened, Sim, I wish it never happened!" She was crying.

"There, there, now." He pulled her closer, patting her on the back. "Cry. Crying is good."

"No, it isn't." Irka disentangled. "Crying is weak. Crying is stupid, crying is—"

"Honey bun, please. Don't say that. It's not stupid."

"Yes it is!" Irka screamed. She wanted to hurt herself somehow, but couldn't decide what to do.

"I know it hurts, I know. I'm hurting too. I... this is... I loved him too." Sim hid in his scarf.

Irka glared.

"Well, if not now, then when, right? This is not the perfect place, or perfect time, and yet, maybe it is." Sim hesitated, adjusting his scarf.

"What is? For what?" Said Irka grimly.

"I wanted to tell you for a long time, Irina, but courage deserted me." He sighed. "Please, forgive me for not being there for you in your life. Some kind of a father I am." He lowered his eyes. "I tried, tried to make it work, believe me. But your mother, she simply wouldn't let go of the bottle. I didn't even know she was pregnant, she never told me. I admit it, I was a coward, and I ran. The entire marriage idea, it was to satisfy the wish of my parents, but then I couldn't do it, not anymore. I decided to change my identity completely, my face, my name. I wanted to make art, wanted to reinvent myself. May I hope that you will understand? Women, it's just... not my thing, you see. Nothing I could do about it."

Irka thought about Pavlik, about all these other boys Sim seduced, and decided maybe one day she will talk to him about it, ask him why, but not now. "I do. I understand." She said quietly, deflated by his honesty and vulnerability. And then, "Are you saying I have grandparents?"

"Oh, no, they died a long time ago. They wanted me to have a wife and a child and a good job. I failed on all accounts, don't you think? Turned out a poor artist." He smirked.

Irka smiled. "Poor you are not. How did you guys meet? You and mama?" Suddenly, a million of questions burst from her mind like fireworks, each tugging at her, each demanding to be asked and answered. She knew nothing about her parents, their time together, nothing at all, there weren't even any pictures.

They heard thin meowing noises, and huffing Ilinichna ran toward them, her face white from strain. "He woke! He woke!" She cried. "He wants a titty!" And with that, she opened the gate, stumbled to Irka and handed her the baby.

She opened the flap and looked in. His tiny face screwed, tiny mouth open wide, demanding food.

"Shh." Irka rocked him. "Mama is here. Just wait a minute, okay? I'll feed you, just one more minute, okay?" And then to Sim, "We have to go."

"The car is waiting, sugar bird."

"Have you decided then?" Asked Ilinichna abruptly, and then added, tearing up. "Oy, if only my Allochka was here. To see me holding a baby. My poor Allochka." She took out a kerchief and blew her nose in it.

Sim patted her on the shoulder. "Enough, Ilinichna, don't come unglued on me now, darling."

"Decided what?" Said Irka.

"The name. What to call him." Ilinichna sniffled.

"Oh. Yes. The name." Irka looking at the graves. "Yes, I decided."

"And? What's it going to be?" Ilinichna asked brightly.

Irka took another moment before answering.

"Pavlik."

Pavlik stopped crying, his tiny eyes found Irka, straining to focus.

"You will be Pavlik, like your papa." She said quietly.

"Let's go *home*."

And they left, Sim ahead, Irka with Pavlik in the middle, and Ilinichna after, carefully closing the gate. The helter-skelter family on their way to make the best of what they've got. Gravel crunched under their feet. Birds sang.

It was a warm spring day.

Glossary

Banya - Russian sauna

Blyad' - whore (from Russian Mat)

Chebureki - a big flat pastry with minced meat inside

Che - what

Che smotrish = whatcha looking at

Dacha - summerhouse on the outskirts of the city

Damochka, dama - dame, woman, lady

Davay - come on, let's do it, move it

Devochka - a girl, a young woman

Dobroe utro - good morning

Dura - female fool, stupid woman, idiot, moron

Fartuk - apron

Hvatit - stop it, enough

Kontora - office, bureau

Krasavitsa - beauty, a beautiful woman

Malchik - a boy, a young man

Matryoshka - a wooden stacking doll

Militsiya - police

Otlichno - excellent, great

Oy - an exclamation of distress, or joy, or anything under the sun, similar to "oh"

Perepalka - an argument, usually loud

Pierogi - Russian pastry stuffed with meat or vegetables

Pod'yezd - entranceway

Propiska - stamp in one's passport stating the address they live at.

Rebyata - kids, guys, people, young people

Shuba - fur coat, the pride of every Russian woman

Spasibo - thank you

Suka - bitch

Svolochi - bastards

Tryapka - dirty mopping cloth, weak person

Venik - a bundle of tree twigs, broom

Zdravstvuyte - good day