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Irkadura

a novel by Ksenia Anske

61,329 words

For Michael Gruber, who asked me to write this.

Chapter 1. Mouse

I wake up, feel for it. It's there. The boar, the catfish next to it, both snoring. It's cold. September first. I'm done with school. It happened yesterday. The fur, so greasy, so disgusting. The bed. We share it. The boar said, "Irkadura, this is Vova. Go on, you know what to do. I'll give you a ruble. Buy yourself a milkshake, some potato chips and gum." I wouldn't. So he beat me. Then he fucked me. They both did, took turns. The boar and the jackal. Drunk.

It's good you have a fat dick, I think. Something to hold on to, while I gut you.

It's like it heard me. The boar heard me. Its eyelids flutter, breathing quickens. Lyosha Kabansky. And mama. Filthy. Parasitic. Naked.

I'm a grey little mouse. Mute, sixteen. Then where? Where will I go? No matter...I'm leaving.

Try to wake mama?

No. Too close, too familiar.

I was two.

I walked up to mama, like now, shook her. Mama said, "Lemme alone." I said, "Dua!" My first word. And the curtains. The

orange curtains. The creaky parquet, pissed through by cats and dogs. "Dua!" I said, so happy. "Dua, dua, dua!" I poked her. She grunted, "Go away." I touched her shoulder. "What?" She sat up. "Whaddya want?" "Dua?" I said. "*Dura*? Who's *dura*?" And then, comprehension, spite. "Who taught you this, Irka? Who?" Her words, slurry. Her face, etched with hard life. "Won't tell me? You stupid girl. I'll show you *dura*." Her movements, swift and precise. She struck me. I flew to the pisspot, knocked it over. Urine. In my shirt, on my face. She beat me.

It.

Mama gone.

Catfish. Big scary catfish. Over me, with its open suckermouth. Stagnant stink in my face. It hurt, hurt me. Everything. I bit my tongue. By the curtains. Right by the orange curtains.

I hate orange.

I was two.

That was then.

Now I'm sixteen, still hate it.

No. No talk. I don't talk. I stopped. They stopped bothering me. They think me an idiot. Good. Get bored of me faster, leave me alone. Grubby bastards. Like to stick their cocks in the first hole they see. I give myself bruises. After.

Lyosha grunts. Gurgles something.

I freeze, balance on one leg.

"Where ya going?" This is half-asleep.

Where pigs like you get quartered, I think. Where they'll teach me how. How to do it.

He mumbles something, turns to mama.

I touch the floor. It creaks. I'm petrified. *I'll skin you alive, I think. I'll crush your ribcage with steel-plated boots. Burrow into you, me, the little harmless mouse. Eat your guts.*

I hold back spit.

I remember.

The day he showed up, Lyosha Kabansky, I remember. Last year, September, like now. Red carnations, a bottle of Stolichnaya in his hand. The butcher, discharged after three years in prison. I remember his eyes. The glint in them. And the very first night. He got mama drunk, he did me then. And every night after. I was fifteen. Not a virgin, though. He was so disappointed. Angry. He beat me. There were scores before him. Dogs, stray dogs eating my soft parts.

I pinch myself. *Go, you dimwitted moron, go! Get out of this.* Lenchka's taunting. Their explosive laughter. Auntie Sonya's derisive jokes. Cat piss, everywhere. Cockroaches. Mites in bed. Dirty rags on the floor. Dog sex under the kitchen table. Grandma drowning newborn puppies in the bucket. Dishes.

Piles and piles of dirty dishes. Shouting, who'd be washing them, yelling, screaming, fighting, pulling of hair.

Yes, yes, I'm going.

I dress quietly. Snatch five rubles from mama's stash, under the vodka bottle. My backpack. A change of clothes. Tiptoe. The corridor. All the spots, I know them, the ones that don't make noise. The door. I click it shut, skid down the stairs, eighteen flights, into the open.

Out. I'm out.

"Irkadura!"

I crane my neck. Grandma, from above. Ninth floor. Brezhnevka. Cream colored thirty years ago, now ugly, streaked with mold. "Where ya off to? It's seven in the morning, stupid! You don't need to go to school no more!" The cockroach. It cackles, retracts.

Auntie Sonya next. "Idiot! Get back! Take the dogs out!"

Lenochka now. "Irkadura lost her mind! Irkadura lost her mind! Irkadura—"

Sonya slaps her. "Quiet. People are looking."

She wails. The little herring wails at the big herring. The big herring slaps it, harder.

I better get going. Head low, I dart. "Hey! Wait!" Behind me. I ignore it. Bump into a bright-eyed boy. Dark-blue uniform, the little Octobrist star on his lapel, asters high in his hand.

Scattered on the asphalt. His mother, bedizened, spiteful.

"Watch where you're going!"

I bolt.

Feet. In sneakers. Bound along familiar route. The long apartment block, the grimy porches. Snowberry bushes. Leaves wilted, yellow, dusty. Grocery store. Ice cream kiosk. It sells gum, coffee gum, my favorite. Sports store with bicycles on display. Kama, Salut. I want Salut, but it costs one hundred rubles. A bottle recycling unit, closed. Small square in front of the school. My school, number 318. Chestnut trees. Begonia flowerbeds around a life-size statue of Lenin, one arm pointed at the bright proletariat future, another one on his coat's lapel, eyes dead, splotched with bird poop.

I stop, catch my breath. Lean on a bench. Kick at the chestnut shells, some cracked, kernels inside. I pick one up and throw it at the flock of pigeons. They scatter in indignation, crying. I throw more, miss, pick up another.

It's eight. Is it? Must be, almost. There they are, scores of them. Marching. First of September, fucking Knowledge Day, so full of annoyingly festive children. Sick. They make me sick. I hate them. Boys in uniform suits, girls in white lacy aprons over shit-brown dresses, braids tied with gauze. Mamas, papas, grandmas. I gather a handful of chestnuts, gaze at some girl.

Eight, plump, smiley. Two pigtails. Hand held by a lipsticked mama.

Too bad these aren't stones, not heavy enough to take out your eyes, dummy. I throw. I miss by a meter. This gets me. I gather more, arch, fling. Suck it, you so happy, suck it! What do you dine on, sturgeon caviar? Fry your fat little belly in hot Krymsky sun?

"Citizen Myshko!"

I whirl around.

"Come to me, citizen. Closer. I have an important question to ask you." The statue of Lenin, talking. Animals, yes, but a statue? "What is your goal in life?"

I stare. *I have no life.*

"Don't know, citizen Myshko? I'll tell you. Your goal is to devote your life to the Soviet state. Grow bigger. Become a Bolshevik." The chestnuts roll out of my palm. Lenin shakes an admonitory finger. "And who is a Bolshevik? A Bolshevik is the one who leads our revolutionary work." He rolls his 'r' in this strange crippled way. "You know what work I'm speaking of, Myshko?" A thundering step off the pedestal. Begonias, smashed under his boots. My palms are sweaty.

I back into the bench, drop on it.

"No, I see you do not. What a shame. Shame and disappointment. Ten school years, wasted. You, citizen Myshko,

are of Menshevik faction." One more step. Five meters between us. "A mouse. A pitiful rodent, a selfish capitalistic vermin." Four. "You're a criminal!" I can't move. "Your crime is in that you do not understand the essence of the Soviet power!" He's flanked by pioneers. Where did they come from? Girls and boys in red neckerchiefs. "Are you ready?" He asks them. "Always ready!" They answer, and...morph into giant woodpeckers. Eyes shiny, hungry. And their cries. Their cries.

"You forgot your neckerchief again!"

"You didn't iron it!"

"You'll be banned from Pioneer Organization!"

Beaks hammer my head. I cower.

"You know what happens to bad pioneers?" That's Lenin's voice, one meter away, laughing, mocking. "Pioneers who refuse to join the communist revolution?" *They turn into you*, I think, no, scream in my head. *You deranged idealistic maniac. Their brains get raped by your bogus equality theories.* "Their necks get snapped like those of chickens." Says Lenin, snatches a woodpecker, flips it around. There is a bone crunch. Two wings flap spasmodically, hang limp. Dead woodpecker at my feet. "Want another demonstration? This is what happens to those who don't believe in the Soviet power, those who don't fit." He's in a rage, in a fever. "The Soviet power will triumph all over the world!" A second woodpecker's neck snapped in a blur, it happens

so fast. "Necessarily!" A third. "Inevitably!" A fourth.

"Permanently!" I lost count.

I believe in my own ass, weirdo. I face him. I wish I could shout this. *Your government is shit. Your propaganda is lies. I'd rather die than fit in your fake forced egalitarianism.* I whack the statue across the face with my backpack. It topples. Woodpeckers scatter, screech. Or was it pigeons? I take off. Don't look back, just run. Under the arch, across the mutilated playground, by busses, trolleybuses, over the avenue. Honks. Shouts. Subway. Belyaev, radial orange line station. Same hated orange. Down.

I go down. Sweaty crowd, flapping glass doors. Nausea in my gut. Sour bile. I spit, push the door open, pass by the booth attendant. She yells at some pensioner, at the outdated permit. Thumbs into turnstyle barriers, I skip without paying. "Hey! Get back! Militia!" I bound to the platform. It's noisy. Rush hour. Marble columns. Steel panels embossed with fairytale firebirds. I halt on the edge, watch the train emerge from the tunnel, the bowels of Moscow metro. It crawls along the tracks, a green-blue tapeworm with five eyes, eight segments.

I gag, queasy.

Doors slide open. I cannon forward, propelled by the mass of bodies pouring inside. Packed, like a can of sardines. No space, no air to breathe. More of them, pressing from the

platform. A squabble breaks out. "Let go of the doors!"
Machinist's voice over the intercom. I grip the handrail, hang
over those seated, sandwiched. Next station announced, doors
slam. Measured staccato of wheels. We're moving, accelerating.
Bodies shift. Bad onion breath in my face, unwashed skin odor,
yellowing teeth, dull eyes.

And. A hand on my ass. A squeeze.

I stiffen. *Again? You degenerate pervert.* I try to turn,
can't, no room. *I wonder what noise your eyeballs will make when
I push them into your skull.* Only then...my vision swims. That
bile again, up in my throat, acid. Puke. I will puke. Freak
forgotten. *Hold on to the rail, Irka, hold on, don't you dare to
faint. Hold on!*

They turn yellow, the walls of the cabin, that shade of
rotten yolk. Lights dim. A trickle of sweat down my back. The
hand is still there, feeling around. The walls wrinkle, fold
with a squelching noise. *Shit.* Is the last I think. *Not right
now!*

Then...the girl. Gone.

Now the mouse.

There. There it sits, squealing, on top of the bed. The bed
in the woods, in the dark. Something else. Long and slimy.
Sloshing. Moving. A thing, a white ghostly thing touches the
mouse, slides inside. It's the boar. The boar has squirted it

out, through its sinuous dick. It uncoils, that thing, lodges in the mouse's belly. Sucks on the walls of its stomach, feeding. The mouse is frantic. It shrieks. Claws its way out.

Out.

It's the girl.

The girl again.

Back.

I blink. Hold on to cold stone. Lean my head on it. White marble. Bright light in my eyes. Stale metro warmth. The hum of commuters, trains, coming, going. Some solicitous face, asking. "You alright?" A pat on the shoulder. I nod. I almost fainted. Not good. The thought, it's back at me, again. I don't want it, but it stays. It nags. It drills me, impales me like a hot iron rod. Note even a thought. Just one word.

Pregnant.

But...the lemon wedge, I think. Potassium permanganate. Why didn't it work? Why didn't it fucking work? I don't want this inside me. I don't want it! I lift my sweater, grab a handful of skin, twist it, pinch it, scratch it. Tears drop. *You deserve this, you retarded bitch, you deserve this.* My diaphragm lifts. I throw up. Hot sour swill, on my sneakers. Wipe my mouth, disgusted. Walk. Somewhere. Need some air. Need to come up.

I read the indicator board.

Teatralnaya station.

Chapter 2. Turtle

I halt on top of the stairs, sway a little. Underground exit. Avenue congested with traffic. Honking. Hysterical crowing. An echo. Vacuous. It rises from the middle of the Theatre Square. From two tons of granite Karl Marx. "Workers of the world - unite!" carved where his knees should be. Roosters around him, combs and wattles. Red flags. Outrage. Clamor. A cock on top of a hastily erected platform. His cries bounce off the building walls. "We demand!" and "Our party!" and "Hold dear the fate of Russia!" and "For motherland!" and "For Stalin!"

Hey, I think, what a nice September day. Why not go proclaim my fanatical love for the dead cobbler's son who slaughtered some twenty million people? That's a nice fellow, he sure will fix my life for me. Let's have a cockfight in his honor. I venture along the sidewalk, dodge onlookers. Curious. Mouths gaping. Fingers pointing. Free entertainment. The light turns green, I dash across the sidewalk, away from this farce.

A cry. I turn my head.

Roosters swarm the platform. The cock gets fisted, pummeled by some guy. A militia Lada screams to a stop five meters away. Three militants rush through the rally, arms high, holding

truncheons, prepared to get feathers flying. The cock keep screaming something. Gets a blow. Drops the megaphone.

I turn away.

Turn a corner. Turn another. It's quieter here. Stop by a Stalinist apartment block, walk through the archway. Here. Breathing. Better. Square inner court. Ten-story facades glued together. Windows, windows, windows. Poplars. Overgrown maples. And that...what is that? Some kind of a mansion? A two-story house in the shadow of the trees. The color of eggshells. Peeling colonnade. Two heavy doors with gilded handles. Posters on display. Portraits.

The Chamber Theater, I read on the plaque.

A low wrought-iron fence, a paved yard. I walk through, around, to the back entrance. A small separate courtyard here, hedged off by snowberry bushes. Three benches by a broken fountain choked with decaying leaves. I pick a cluster of berries, absentmindedly, scatter them on the ground, pop the lot with my foot. Traces of vomit dried on my sneakers. Soaked into shoelaces. Shiny smears on the asphalt, where the berries were.

I pop more.

Count.

A Mercedes rolls up, new, shiny. Parks. A couple young men jump out. One tall, blond, effeminate almost. Another shorter, wiry, hair dark. They wear trench coats, blue and black, flutter

by me. Like on wings. The blond, a parrot, blue with gold. The dark one...a butterfly. A black admiral. Rich black velvet. They glance at me, through me, like I'm a fixture. A stone statue. Fly up the stairs, disappear inside.

My heart thumps so loud, I think they'll hear. Actors. *Oh, you sentimental romantic slob*, I think. *Haven't you seen actors before? What's so special? What...*but my feet. They don't listen. They carry me up the steps, into the gloom of the old foyer. I blink, adjust to the light. A worn marble staircase runs up and down from the landing. That's where I stand. Like an entrance to an oubliette. A bulletin board to the right. Announcements so old, the paper turned yellow. A glass partition to the left. A woman behind it, hunched over a desk. Fifty? Sixty? Something. A tawny shawl, a pair of oversized glasses. Face beaten by grief. *A turtle*, I think, *a Russian tortoise*.

The phone rings. She picks up. "Chamber Theater. Yes." She says. "Ah, Tanechka! Listen. He's not here yet, but he said he'll be soon, you hear me?" She nods some, passes the receiver to another hand. "But you know Sim. He never says the time." She listens, taps the pen on an open ledger. "Pavlik and Kostya just got here, you hear me?"

I step up. She hears me, raises her eyes. Questioning. Still listening to the receiver. Then I see something. A piece of paper taped to the glass.

CLEANING WOMAN NEEDED.

If it isn't my day after all. I smile.

She slams the receiver, the turtle, peers at me. Through those thick glasses. Eyes huge, mistrustful.

I take out my notepad, write, tear off the page, slide it in into the slot. She doesn't even look, pushes it back. "What's this for? I don't need this." Sudden comprehension on her face, and fear. "Ah! You're one of those. Got you." Shoes me away with her hand. "Well, I have nothing for you. Nothing. You hear me?" She starts yelling, waving arms. "Go away! I don't need your trinkets! This is a theater, not a market! Seryozha!"

I try again.

She sucks in air, inflates. "What is this, a game to you...or what? I said, out! Devil take you. The lot of you begging around, needy canailles...Seryozha! Where the hell is he." She heaves her bulk into the chair, dials a number. "Vladimir Kuzmich? This is Faina Ilinichna. No-no, I have a beggar here...one of those...what? Seryozha has gone somewhere. What do I know? Don't ask me. Yes. She needs to be escorted out. Yes-yes. Thank you." She slams the receiver down, pretends to write something in the ledger. I push in the page. It floats on her desk. "I said—" She scans it. "Oh! But— You're about the job? Why didn't you say so right away?"

Bit off my tongue, I think, metaphorically speaking.

"Mute, are you?" I nod, slide in my disability certificate. She studies it. "Myshko, Irina Anatolievna...invalid...since the age of two? Goodness gracious." Looks up. "Can't talk at all? Oh, what a pity. What a pity! And I, old dura, I thought you're one of those deaf-mutes from the terminal, devil take me." She opens the door. "Don't mind me, come in, come in. Want some tea?" She frowns in that stern motherly way.

And I grin. Silly, but I grin. Grin and nod. Step inside. The room is so small, it's like a closet. "All good then. Don't worry. Here, sit." Tiny table in the corner. Checkered red-and-white oilcloth, electric kettle, china teapot, a box of loose Indian tea, cups, saucers, shortbread cookies. A package of cubed sugar. I sit. "There you go." She starts the water. "Look at those eyes, those blue eyes. Like my Allochka's." What is it? A change. A cloud over her face, grief. Twists it, crumps it. A tear rolls. She mops at it, as if ashamed. "She died, my Allochka, last year. Crashed, in their Zhiguli...it's all Sashka. That alcoholic, devil take him. I told her, I said, don't you mingle with that drunkard! You think she listened? Never. Stubborn, like her father." She blows her nose into a kerchief, cotton, washed and ironed. Fussess. Pours tea.

I sit still, afraid to break the spell.

"Rode it right into a tree, he did. She died instantly. When they...told me on the phone, I thought I heard it wrong. I

thought... What would you do...would you believe it? Would you? It couldn't be my Allochka, I thought, no, it couldn't." She chokes, sniffs into her kerchief. Props up her glasses. "Look at you. So young. One day you'll be a mother. God forbid you to outlive your children, God forbid, you hear me? Better to die together." She's suddenly mad, eyes shining. "And that scoundrel? Sashka? He walked! The rascal walked! Brezhnev would've sent him right to jail! Right away!" She pulls up her chair. "And now what? They spit on it. Look at what's happening. All corrupt, all bribed." Slaps the table. "Every day I watch the news, every day someone is killed. Every day! Crime is up. Prices are up. I can't buy a loaf of bread anymore for twenty kopecks, and my salary is still the same! Then how? How should I live on it, huh? Starve myself? Beg in the street? You tell me!"

I shrug.

She gives me the cup. "Be good if Vladimir Kuzmich hires you. You're a decent honest girl, aren't you? Not like that whore, Lida. Filthy woman, lazy and filthy, that's my opinion for you. Don't know what he found in her, never did a decent job, not once. Got knocked up by some scum, and there you go. Don't look at them cookies. Eat them!" She pushes the saucer toward me. I sip tea. Hot water scalds my lips. I pick up a cookie, don't notice how, eat half a pack. My breakfast.

The door opens. And, wrong. This is wrong. It's...how...no, not possible. Horror steals over me. I know it. All of it. Every bit. More than I want. The sharp nose, the belly buttoned up in a grey jacket, the pants. What's behind the pants.

Vova.

A year ago.

Lyosha and he...

"Well? Is this your beggar then, Ilinichna?" He ogles me, rubs his hands. The jackal. And that sour smell. Surprise on his mien. Wonder. Then recognition. Memory. Finally, his lips stretch. His leer, full of smugness. His eyes like gimlets, fixed upon me. I hold his gaze. Node of nerves. Paralyzed. *I'll stretch that nose of yours down to your stomach, I think, poke it like a balloon, to spill your guts.*

"Vladimir Kuzmich!" Ilinichna labors up. "Oh. Never mind me now. I bothered you for nothing. This girl here, she's about the job."

"Is she?" He studies me.

"Cleaning woman. To replace Lida?"

"I know! Why are you telling me? Shakalov, Vladimir Kuzmich, theater manager." He stretches out his hand.

I can't move, nothing in my body can. No muscle. No breath. There it hangs. The hand I remember. Dry skin, whispering bones.

And nails. Sharp, yellowed. They can poke holes, holes in my flesh. Why is he doing this? To torture me? To laugh at me?

"Get up." That's Ilinichna, hissing. "She's mute, can't talk, you know. Such a pity. Irina is her name." And that apologetic smile, makes me want to vomit. His slimy stare touches me. His depravity. I feel it on my skin. Take his hand. And crush it. But he's stronger. Crushes mine. I wince.

His locomotion, animal. Eyes, covetous. "The janitor, you say?" Clicks his tongue. "Mute." He lets go. I rub my hand. "That should work out really well. No whining, no complaining. I like that." His lips bare crooked teeth. "My father used to say, silence is a virtue. Let's give it a try. See how you do this week, then we'll talk about...payment." It's like a stone lodges in my gut, this word, *payment*. He raved then, when he did me, *that's your payment*. "Good job, Ilinichna." She just stands there, gapes and stands. It's too easy. Out of his character. I can see it written on her face.

He talks fast. "We have a big performance tonight. *Big* performance." Thrusts out his belly. "Do you understand what that means? Yes? Good. Important people will be here. Everything has to be tip-top. You will sweep and mop both the stage and the auditorium, before six, not a minute later. Got that?" I gape. There's fur on his ears. His nose is a snout, but only for a moment. "Come." His claw on my arm. "I'll show you around." He

drags me out. And it goes to hell. His ears shoot up. Coarse fur sprouts on his chin, cheeks, creeps up his forehead. His limbs grow long, his nails curl, blacken. The steps down crumble to dirt. Orange dirt. My feet kick up dust.

So I fight. I fight it.

The girl.

The mouse.

No!

Sickness grips me. Sickness to my stomach. Stairs turn darker, beastlier. Some kind of a narrow cavern, corners reek of piss and animal feces. We scuttle along. A predator and its prey, poised for slaughter. Roots. There are roots sticking out, they catch my hair. Sand fills my eyes, mouth. No light here. Smell of damp earth. Shakalov's face pulses, jackal, human, jackal.

No! I think. Stop! I'm tired of it. Enough! I thrash, to stay present, to fight, but a debilitating numbness is over me. Grips me. His hand on my tits. His voice in my ear. "Easy, easy. Why the struggle? Waste of energy. I'm trying to be nice to you. I'm giving you a job." It's hot. I'm hot. "It's all very simple. You know how to please me, don't you, it's all I'm asking. Please me and keep quiet, *dura*. Got it?" His hand up my shirt, down my pants, on my throat. Sharp pain in my belly. I can't fight anymore. I can't...I...

The mouse.

The jackal howls, flips it up, catches it between jaws. Tosses it around. The mouse peeps, scurries away. A paw slaps it, nudges it back. At last, tired of the game, the jackal makes its predatory move. Teeth sunk into the mouse. It squeals in fright, but it doesn't get eaten. Chewed, mutilated, but not eaten. Left alive. For another go. Another game. The mouse pees itself, passes out.

The girl is back.

How much time has passed? I'm sprawled on the cold tile floor. Some utility room. Dim light. A cracked sink. A tangle of pipes covered with spider webs, old aluminum buckets, broomsticks, a ladder. It smells of wet rags and mold. I feel myself, my shirt, my bra, my... *You slimy little prick*, I think. Pull myself up, hold on to the wall. Stand in semi-darkness. *The jackal for the boar. Nice exchange.* I seethe. My instinct takes over. Cleaning. What I always did. They squabbled, I cleaned. I thought, maybe if I'll keep myself busy, they won't notice, forget about me, leave me alone. My hands rubbed and scrubbed and scraped until my fingers bled. I take hold of the broomstick. It sends up a cloud of dust. I sneeze. Sneeze again. The smell...

How did this Lida clean the place? She must've sucked his dick instead. I contain the urge to start organizing, peek out the door.

Long corridor. Beige walls. Wooden doors, an announcement board, a placard. The linoleum floor warped, cracks in the walls, huge fissures from ceiling to floor, clumsily patched. I step out. Wonder what direction the stage is. No recollection in my mind how I got here, except that dirt passage. That animal hole.

I take a lungful of air. And then.

Voices.

Chapter 3. Parrots

I freeze. Listen. They move. "What do you think...should we go rehearse?" This voice is low, deep. My stomach drops. There's something in it that makes me shiver. I step back, hide behind the door. Leave a crack open. Listen. They're closer now, steps, closer. "Uh, not today, Pavlik, okay? I want to be alone...hope you don't mind." Effete, this one. The vowels long and drawn out. Nasal somewhat. "Don't worry, you'll do great. Sorry, but, I do need to be alone...gather my thoughts, you know, delve into my inner artiste to extract the essence of—" "—art and love. I understand." Picks up the other. I see them.

My heart hammers.

The actors.

The parrot and the butterfly. "Listen, Pavlik, it's got absolutely nothing to do with...it's nothing personal, okay?" Kostya says. I can see his face, a couple meters away. Angular, sharp, like a bird's.

"Be honest." Pavlik stops him. I hold my breath. His profile, soft, lips twitching. An arm away, I could touch him. "Is this because...yesterday—"

"Shh."

They heard me! I close my eyes, stand still. No. They didn't. When I'm back, I hear the jingle of keys. They disappear into dressing rooms. Each has his own. Boys, not much older than me. I shake my head. Shake it out. Try to. Misery. *This is a bad idea, Irka. All you're missing right now is falling for an actor.*

I wade out, stare at Pavlik's door.

Stop this nonsense, you hapless fool. Get to work. But my nose is by his name, printed on a piece of paper, stuck inside a plastic frame. BABOCH PAVEL ANTONOVICH, ACTOR. I look across the corridor. ARAEV KONSTANTIN MIKHAILOVICH, ACTOR.

Pavel. I roll the name in my head. It has a nice ring to it. My face burns. That air around him, proud poise, polite and unhurried manner of speaking. I press my ear to his door and listen. He hums something, a pleasant tune. Feet swish on the floor. A waltz? Something. My pulse races. The broom slides out of my sweaty fingers.

I wonder what it's like. To stand onstage, flooded with lights, say beautiful words, make people laugh, cry. Maybe he could teach me...maybe.

Footsteps.

I jump away. Heart in my throat. Run. Hallway after hallway, empty. No people. No direction. And suddenly...I'm there. How? Stumble into it. It's large, dark. The chamber

theater performance hall. Rows of chairs. Particles of dust dance in my wake, in the light from the doorway. And up above, a concave ceiling, an enormous crystal chandelier, turned off. Dull twinkle. I creep forward, row by row. On the stage gilded beams, rods interlocked into a human size birdcage, elaborate, reminiscent of constructivist avant-garde. I start sweeping, stop, the broom above the floor, my eyes fixed on something, on nothing. Pavlik. I want to touch his hair. Want to...would it be as soft as butterfly wings? *Cut this foolishness! You're ugly, ugly!*

I get lost in work. Mechanical repetition. Gaze at the pile of sweepings. Slowly, it gets to me. The dustpan. How will I scoop it up? I forgot the dustpan. I lean the broom on the wall and run out, turn a corner, and crash into him.

Pavlik.

He's surprised. His face. Insectile. Covered with full stage makeup, severe, sharp contrast of chalky foundation and dark eye shadow. His body in a black leotard. And wings. Huge black wings. Coincidence?

"Oh!" He says. "My apologies. I didn't see you coming."

I stare. I know that if I stare any longer, I'll be a lost cause. And so I am. Like a magnet, drawn. Nothing. Nothing I do can tear me away. This is bad. Bad.

"Did I scare you? I'm sorry." He offers his hand. "Pavel Baboch. And you are...?"

This is as much as I can bear. I rush around him.

"Where you going?"

I stagger, dodge a flock of actors dressed as exotic birds, cockatiels, popinjays, lories. Parrot, I was right. All of them, parrots. They giggle at something by the open door of a dressing room, a faint smell of perfume on them. I skid, reach the end of the corridor. There. The utility closet. I slam into it. Pant, my lungs on fire. I found my way. I did. Somehow. Pavlik's face. It's burned into my...hangs in the darkness like an afterimage. It makes me ache. Why, why. *It's like catching a butterfly, I think. You see it, you're hooked. You want it. You don't care how, so you chase it like an idiot with clumsy swipes, the inept hunter that you are. You wait for it to mount a flower, you spring and it's gone. The cruel beastie. And if you do get lucky, if you do catch it, you'll crumple its wings and it will die, right in your hand.*

I swat at my eyes. Take a breath. Find a dustpan, walk back, head down. *Don't you look at him, you lackey, beat it into your head.*

I enter. They're all there. The troupe. Practicing. Hanging off the cage, Kostya, Pavlik, a dozen others. Girls, boys, twenty somethings, in skin-tight leotards, with wings and

painted faces. Violet, turquoise, emerald, red. Kostya jumps down. His hair shines in the floodlights, his tall frame in blue, blue wings, blue face. Blue and gold. I gasp. I guessed it, I guessed it right. I knew it. Blue and gold, blue and gold... "Come on!" Pavlik lands next to him. They laugh, slap hands. I busy myself with scooping up the trash, carry it to the bin in the hallway. My hands shake. I try to calm down, breathe slower. Walk back to the closet, find my way faster now, fish a stiff rag from under the sink, soften it in hot water, fill one of the buckets, wring the rug out, drape it over the broom, walk back. Begin to mop. There are shouts onstage, calls, laughter.

A hand on my shoulder. I flinch.

It's a touch unlike I ever...no filth in it, just warmth and. Maybe interest. Maybe. "Oh...sorry." He tears his hand away. Pavlik. "Sorry to bother you. I just wanted to apologize...in the hallway, when you were, earlier, passing by. I didn't hurt you in any way, did I?"

I shake my head. *Hurt me?* It's so ludicrous, I smile.

"I know, they look stupid." He touches the wings. "It's for tonight, for the premiere. Are you staying to watch?"

I gape.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Kostya saunters up. Two sharp eyes on me, jaws working. He's chewing gum. "Who you talking to?"

"Oh, just. Our new...janitor, I think?" Pavlik waits.

And I want to explode, I want to say, *Myshko, Irina, good to meet you. Allow me to wipe the dirt off your precious actor's feet.* And it freezes, as always, it get's stuck in my throat. I can't, can't say it. *Dumb mute cunt.* I cough, as if it will help.

"You okay?" That's Pavlik.

"What's your name?" Kostya stops chewing, blows a bubble, pops it. With a hideous noise. Blows another. "What's her name, do you know?"

I go through the pantomime. Same. How many times.

"You can't talk?" Kostya, interested now. "How...can you hear though? Or you're deaf, too?"

"Kostya." Pavlik, abashed.

"What? Just calling things by their name. I'm an artiste, I must speak the truth. Therein lies our genius. You get it? Get what I'm saying? Our supremacy over ordinary *peasants.*" He pats him on the back. Another bubble. It plasters over his lips.

I'd love to see you shot, I think. Peasants.

"That...true?" Pavlik, close to my face. "You can't talk?"

A handclap.

We start, look around.

"Morning, children!" A voice barks from the back row. Out waddles a man, no, a seal. Big. Fat. Shrewd eyes. Glossy

pampered face. Hands in the pockets of an expensive silk suit. And a scarf. A bright spotted scarf around his neck, ends flung over his shoulders.

Calls answer.

"Good morning, Sim!"

"Morning, Simeon Ignatievich!"

"Afternoon, more like it."

Kostya is first. He kisses him, a peck on each cheek. They all do, swarm around. "No! No-no-no! I said, no!" He shakes them off, although his eyes dance with delight at all this attention. "Enough! Don't mind me! Continue!" It's a command. Actors obey, jump onstage. "Well, what is this? What's with the sour miens? What are you, sleepy flies—or what? Wake up! Wake! Up!" He claps to drive it home. He's larger than any of them, larger than air. He dominates. Fills the stage, the auditorium, with his voice, with his...something, some insane energy. I want to stay, to feel it, to feed on it.

There is murmur.

"Pavlik, you're first. Kostya, next. Tanechka, my dear, whatever happened to your face? Why is it bloated?"

"What? Where?" Tanechka, decked out in red, red wings, red face, feels her cheeks, her lips, her temples.

"Go wash it with cold water. Ice pack for five minutes. Reapply makeup. Back onstage in ten. Go!" He claps and she's off.

"Who's this? Who are you?" He stares at me. "Someone tell me, she seems to have swallowed her tongue."

That I did, I think.

"Sim..." Pavlik whispers.

"Oh. Is she? That's unfortunate. I'm sorry, my child. I didn't know. However, I do need you to scat. We're starting the rehearsal. Now." He pins me with his gaze, unwavering. Not mean, no, but piercing. Like he can see right through me, like he knows, instantly, like it's...I can't bear it, turn and flee, mop and bucket, thinking, *I'll come back to watch you, Pavlik.*

I get busy. Minutes, hours. I scrub and dust and organize and clean and I'm done before six. Buy an Olivier salad in the cafeteria and eat it and drink hot tea with sugar and wait. There is this hush, this silence right before the start of a performance. The cafeteria is empty, save for the serving girls. I make my way to the hall, spy on the spectators. Through the windows. There is a line. A long line to get in. It's evening. Rain pounds on umbrellas. Ushers round the corner. I dart through the doorway before they see me. Frantic. What if they ask for a ticket? What? But...where? Where would I...

Hushed clamor of voices behind me. Behind the heavy front doors. They open. An uproar rolls in, fills the foyer. Steps. I hide behind the velvet curtain by the doorway nearest stage, peek out. Musicians enter the orchestra pit. Greet each other, move chairs, sit, tune their cellos, violins. Test the piano.

The excitement, the din of the crowd takes over usher's cries. "Tickets! Tickets, please! I need to see the tickets!" The public streams in. Ten minutes and the place is packed. All seats are taken. People stand on the carpeted steps between row sections, fill up the balconies, lean over, shout. I sneak out, mingle in. Faces, whispers, coughs, hands, playbills, calls. It's hot. Sweat rolls down my back.

The chandelier dims. Darkness quiets the noise somewhat. Stage lights whizz to life. Pillars of green, red, yellow fall on the velvet curtains. A moment of awe stills the theater. A few coughs. Tension mounts. As if by an unspoken signal, a burst of applause. It rises, crests, and scatters into nothing. Silence falls. The conductor mounts the podium, lifts his baton. Music, bright, light, some kind of vaudeville. Curtains part.

Three rows of heads in front of me. I stand in my toes.

Kostya prances out. The parrot, a macaw. Dazzlingly blue. His gestures are comical, obscene. He jiggles his tail, hops, skips, spreads his arms. To music, no words. Just music and dance and more birds, and, finally, Pavlik. A smidge of black

amidst color. They crowd him, peck on him. Push him into the cage. Kostya says something now, but I don't hear it. I'm on the edge, I'm...something isn't right. It feels true, it. I know it's a play, but. They toss their heads, like beaks, like they're about to kill him. It. The butterfly. The birds. About to eat the butterfly. About.

I'm losing it.

My heart. My heart has gone berserk.

It's real, it's. I am.

The mouse.

And the birds. Crammed in the cage. Curved beaks, clawed feet. The butterfly thrashes. They attack it, the birds attack it. Hammer it, screech at it, hungry. The mouse squeaks, darts to the cage, but there are legs, animal legs in the way. They step on it, other animals, kick it, kick it, and...applause.

The girl.

Back.

Applause.

"Bravo!" Cries a voice. "Encore!" From the balcony. "More!"

I steady myself, lightheaded.

"Kotik! Kotik!"

Arms open, Sim strolls onstage, joins hands with actors. They stretch into a line, bow, bow again. I see, and I don't see. Curtains close. Musicians leave. The spectators file out,

stream around me. I'm rooted to the floor. By something, by a bad premonition. Walk up to the orchestra pit, now empty, lean in. Breathe hard. I'm alone.

The stage, beckons.

You're a mouse. That's all you are, puny creature. You stink of rodent droppings, you trite taciturn thing. You spent your life hiding, in a hole. Weakling. Coward. Go on. Keep on hiding, what a way to live. I lift my sweater, hit my side. Keep on living in fear. I hit harder. Do you like it? You filth, you craven piece of shit, you...

I snap. I'm mad, I'm so mad.

No! Shut up!

I get onstage.

Chapter 4. Jackal

My heart is in my head. It thunders there. Rages. My feet detach. I no longer know how to stand. The view, the auditorium, stops my breath. Rows and rows and rows and lights and thick scarlet velvet. I walk to the cage. Touch it. The bars feel smooth. I grab one, begin climbing. Stop at the top. Perch. Like they did. Perch like a bird. I can be a bird. Can't I? Only something changes. The air. It shifts. The dampness. A draft of cold, and the smell. Of mold. Of decay. Of...

I'm not alone anymore.

In the center of the front row sits a boar. Huge. Its fur is greasy, shiny, disgusting. Next to it, a catfish, enormous, eyes glassy, pissed. They watch me, the boar and the catfish, stiffling yawns. A giant cockroach scurries up, drops by the boar's feet like a dog. Two herrings, one big, one small, slither next to the catfish.

"Whatcha looking at? Go on. Show us what you do." Grunts the boar.

"Irka! Onstage!" Drawls the catfish. "What are you doing sitting on that thing for? You gonna fall, stupid!"

"Come on, perform."

"Hurry!"

"You've got to be joking me. A mouse can't act." Says the herring. "A mouse is good for one thing only."

"What's that?" Asks the little herring.

"For food, you idiot! To be fed to a boar, or to a jackal, or some such."

"You'll break your neck! Get down, *dura!*" The cockroach.

"It has no neck to break!" Chortles the boar.

Get the fuck out of here. I think.

They turn up their heads, expectant.

I said, out! I want to yell.

They laugh. The boar, the catfish, the herrings, the cockroach. Cackle. Joined by others. In every seat. The hall is full of them. Woodpeckers, roosters, the tapeworm. The turtle, the parrots, all those popinjays, and lories, and parakeets, and the macaw. In the back, in the shadows, stands the jackal. But...where is the butterfly?

I hyperventilate. Cling to the rods. Another moment, and I'll tumble. I don't see shapes anymore, only parts. Beaks, teeth, paws and hooves and fins. Wings and claws. They move in on me. They hiss, they roar, screech and squeal. Clack and snap and bellow and snarl. They crowd the stage and crawl on it. Then the butterfly. It dives, as if it wants to deter them. Does it?

They snatch at it, beat pollen off its wings. I moan. I try to fight it. I try to.

And I fail.

The mouse.

The mouse slides off the rod, flips its tail, and plummets down. Its paws pedal in the air. For nothing. Nothing to hold on to. It drops, rolls to a stop. And the mob is upon it. Biting, stinging, pecking, pushing, jabbing, shoving. They stop, part. A bigger predator claims the prey.

The jackal.

The girl.

And...

Shakalov.

And I...I open my eyes, squint. Try to make out his face.

"Up!" He's at my side. "To my office."

Shit. I think, stand, sway and nearly lose my footing. I see white spots, follow him on unsteady legs, in some delirious haze. My hands shake. Stomach. Nausea again. I feel eyes on my back. Turn around. Sim Kotik, arms crossed, face contorted in...what is it, loathing? For a second we stare at each other. He breaks the gaze, walks away.

Two deserted hallways, one staircase down, one up, we're in the administrative wing, in front of a shabby door at the very end. Same plastic frame, same printed piece of paper.

SHAKALOV VLADIMIR KUZMICH, THEATER MANAGER.

He procures a set of keys, waits.

All I want is to sit, to rest. My abdomen cramps. That thing inside me, that. I feel ill. Hesitate. Too weak to fight. Too weak. I know what's coming.

He pushes me in, locks the door. Turns on the light.

His office is small, a drab room with a single window. The fountain backyard behind it. Yellowing maples, dark under the evening rain. A lampshade the color of snot. A desk, institutional, of fake brown wood. A worn out rug, armchairs. And, yes. Not a surprise. There they are, the permanent fixtures. Portraits on the wall. Gilded, determined. Lenin. Karl Marx. Engels. And one more, some guy in a black beret I don't recognize.

They grin. Lascivious. Maniacs. Like all they want is for him to fuck me. And he does. Right on the rug, right in front of their eyes. He fucks me. I can't even lift my arms. All I hope for is not to puke. Fight in my head. Fight the only way I have left. *Stay, stay present, stay. Don't let him. Don't. Come on.* My blood boils. My breath comes in rattles. Biliou, the taste in my mouth, from his slime. Brackish. But I'm here. I'm not gone, not a mouse. I'm here. It's something. It's...strange. I'm proud. A smile touches my lips. "That's a good girl." He whispers, hot. "Please me, and you'll get your...payment."

He pants. It's hard for him to come.

You know what I'm going to buy with that money? I think. Eggs and a syringe. I'll spritz them into the seat of your ratty Zhiguli, so after a week it will stink so bad between your legs, you'd think your dick has rotted.

"What's the matter with you? Get up." He zips up his pants. "Here." He gives me a five. I smirk. What a step up from one ruble. "Lyosha is mad at you. Wondering where you went. Listen." This, closer. "Be good. I won't tell him you're here. Not a word. Stay."

Lyosha, you bastard, I think. I hope your liver bursts. I hope you die face-first in mud like a pig that you are.

I button myself up, brush off.

"You're lucky," Shakalov says, "because I like you. Silence makes things easier, don't you think?"

And I think, *little do you know.*

"You keep me happy, I keep you happy. Here. You can sleep in one of the dressing rooms." He gives me a key, pushes me out, locks the door. I look at the number, takes me a while to find it. Dark. Damp. Musty. I drop on the pile of costumes and cry myself to sleep.

Every night.

Many nights.

Weeks.

A month? A little over.

Mornings, I clean. Then rehearsals, shows. I spy. Watch. Then Shakalov. In the utility closet. In his office. Drop dead tired at night. Wake up. Early.

How much longer? I think.

It's six in the morning. Cracked clock on the wall. Air frigid, uniform greyness. I sneeze, fling off a moth-eaten blanket. Sit on the mattress. No windows here, but stacks and stacks of cardboard boxes, stage props, costumes, wigs, masks, shoes. A vanity table, empty, dusty. I sneeze again. A horsefly lands on my thigh. Fat. Black. Crawls around in search of blood, clicks mandibles, sticks out its proboscis. I slap it and miss. It does a circle, aims for my face. I shoo it away.

A horsefly? In October? I think. *You bitch, you just try and bite me.* I raise my arm, wait for it to surface, but it vanishes. I peer in the shadows. How many nights, like this. Alone. How many chilly mornings. An ominous feeling spreads through my chest, lodges under my heart. I chase it away, dress. Wash in the utility room, over the sink, wipe under my arms, between my legs. I haven't had a hot shower in over a month. Exchanged that pigsty for a jackal den.

What have I become? Scared. So scared. I don't dare. No, never leave.

Pavlik.

I brush my hair with my fingers. The theater is still empty. Go to his dressing room. I got the key. I'm supposed to clean it. I don't, really. Mostly, I obsess. Try to calm my heart. Look at his things, touch them, smell them. Like now.

I turn on the light, shut the door. Two hours to myself. One and a half, to be safe. So I'm not caught. Stupid, stupid. I sit in front of the large mirror, at his makeup table. Feel at home, somehow. With all his things. Silent. Mannequin heads in wigs. An old sofa. A coffee table. Wheeled rack of costumes. Costumes on hangers, on the hooks on the wall, in neat piles on the floor, on the backs of chairs. Tidy. I made sure everything is tidy. Perfect.

I'm a hopeless twat.

I get up, ran my fingers through his leotards. Silky. Scoop them up, bury my face, inhale. Pollen, pollen and field dust. Drop them, walk back to the mirror.

Can you get any more pathetic?

It stares at me. My face. Round, pale, blue eyes. Bangs, chopped off, uneven. *Dura*. I think with venom. *What are you doing here? What hope do you have? You foolish buffoon. This isn't love, it's desperation, neediness, and you know it. What are you to him? Garbage. He talks to you because he's polite.*

I pace the room.

No, it's not just politeness. There's something...there. I look at myself. Compassion. I scoff. Compassion is not love. It comes from pity, from condolence, from remorse. You know who instills remorse? Dead people. I sweep bangs out of my face. Then what is love, if not compassion? Tell me! My eyes burn.

A door slams above.

I jump. It's eight. Eight!

My hands shake so bad, I can't lock the door. Ilinichna. She's never late. This means...I run to the closet. Grab the broom and dart to the auditorium. An echo of voices. Closer. *They're early.* I reach the doorway, halt.

Kostya and Pavlik, onstage, flustered. Sim in the first row, arms spread over seat backs, fingers encrusted with rings. A sequined scarf around his neck.

"*Lis-ten!*" He yells. "How many times do you need to be told?"

They falter, steal a glance at each other.

"What? What do you hear?" He leaps up.

Kostya tosses his hair. "Sim, I—"

"Silence!" He roars. His face turns purple. "Words don't matter!"

Pavlik now. "But you asked—"

"I asked you to listen! *Lis-ten!*" Sweat on his forehead, he wipes it off with the scarf. I reach the middle row and stop, clutch the broom so hard, my hand hurts.

"Inside you. There. What is it? Music. Do you hear it? Music! Words. Stories. Can you hear them? I'm asking you, can you hear them?"

They nod. Pavlik sees me.

"What now." Sim turns.

I want to fall through the floor.

"Ah! Irina. Perfect. Come here."

I make a step, two. What does he want?

"Get down, both of you. I want you to sit and watch."

I think I know, and I think I don't want. Don't want to know. Don't want to try, to—

He lifts my face. His hands are warm. But not that warm. No. Not awful. Tender. "You don't need words to talk, only love, understand? Nothing else. We speak with our hearts. Do we not?" He asks me. Me.

I gulp.

"Sim, Irina doesn't talk." Says Pavlik.

"You're wrong! And do not interrupt me!" He barks. "She has music inside her. I can hear it. Can't you hear it?" This is to them. A heat wave flushes me. "Don't be scared." He says to me.

"You either have it, or you don't. The stage will tell. Go. I want to see you do it."

I stand, frozen.

"I've seen you sneak up onstage before. Go!" He claps.

My heart is in my mouth.

Kostya and Pavlik watch me. Kostya with a trace of distaste, Pavlik with interest, curiosity. And Sim. He waves his hand at me. I take a step, another, mount the stage. Walk across it, to the middle, stop right over the orchestra pit, stare at them. A jumble of thoughts in my mind, and one of them, the strongest. Talk. I want to talk. I want to learn, to relearn how to talk. I want...my voice. I want it back. I.

"I'm waiting."

"Sim, I'm sorry, but..." Pavlik tries. "How can Irina perform if she doesn't know what you want of her?"

Sim grimaces. "Quiet. She knows. I heard it. Watch." He's so sure, so convinced of it, that I start believing. I start.

I listen.

I listen inside me.

And I hear it. It's there. Always been there. My music. My words. I drop the broom. It clunks against the boards. I don't notice, don't hear. All I hear is, inside me. I stare at the front row, at the seat in the middle, where the boar sat last time. There it is again, grinning. I take a cube of sugar from

my pocket, beckon, wave it about. The boar growls, rolls off the seat, trots to the stairs, waddles onstage. Saliva drips from its jaws, a pair of tusks gleam in the light. Two bloodshot piggy eyes swivel at me. Fur stands on end. I hold out the sugar cube.

Come on, piggy, come and get it.

The boar raises its head, roars, and charges. It runs straight at me. I crouch, leg wide apart, fists raised. Three meters away, two. One. I punch it in the snout. It squeals, careens, lands on the boards with a deafening thump. The force of the collision throws me off balance. I sit back, hard, but don't wince, don't cry. The punch felt good. So good. In seconds, I'm up, at the boar's side, kicking it, jabbing its hairy belly, slamming between its legs, right into its sinuous cock. The boar yelps, struggles to get to its feet. I can't stop. I want to beat the living shit out of the pig, I want to pummel it to pulp. Sweat streams down my face, gets in my eyes. I don't care. *Eat that, dickhead!* I want to scream. *Perververt! Asshole! Swine!*

"More! More! I want you to kill it! Kill it!" Sim springs up, agitated.

I grin. It's like he opened a faucet. My pent up pain splashes and gurgles and rushes out. I stagger about the stage. More beasts. The catfish is here, and the cockroach, and the

herrings. *Die, all of you!* I strike left and right. *I want you to never bother me again! Perish! Cease to exist! Leave me alone!* They melt into one pulsing blur. I grapple with something slippery, wrestle with something coarse, smash, kick, hit, hit with my fists, my feet, elbows, knees, head, slam with my whole body. Then, sharp pain. It rips from my stomach up. I bend, out of breath.

The air explodes with applause.

Sim claps. Pavlik claps. The whole troupe is here. They're all standing, clapping. "Bravo!" Shouts Sim. "Brilliant! Brilliant!"

I'm dumbstruck.

Only one face is sour. Shakalov. He stands in the door, in the back. It's dark. Not the shadow, something else. I give a start. I threatened it. The jackal. It hums. His face hums. Crawls with flies. Horseflies. He turns around and leaves, and the horseflies, they follow him. In a long angry tail.

Chapter 5. Horseflies

I can't sleep. Can't close my eyes. Take a slice of bread from under my jacket rolled up as a pillow, crumble it, eat it. Stare into shadows. My nerves are taut, eyes hurt from strain. The clock ticks off minutes. It's after midnight. Darkness suffocates me, but I don't want to turn on the light. If there are horseflies in the shadows, I don't want to see them. Maybe there aren't any, maybe there are, maybe it's paranoia. I've been staring and listening for close to an hour now. Nothing. It's nothing.

Dark empty theater. Cold, quiet. My skin crawls.

It's coming. What?

I don't know yet, but I know it's coming. I know.

Something soft touches my hand. I jump. There is a buzz. A horsefly lands on my face, another crawls up my arm, stings my shoulder. I cry out, slap it. The room fills with that annoying hum. *Damn you!* I grab the blanket, flap it, swing it. The hum is louder now, as if the darkness itself is alive, a thick cloud of insects. I panic, stumble between boxes, overturn them, bump into the vanity table. Something tips, crashes to the floor.

Glass shards spray in all directions. I cover my face, wade forward, feel for the light switch.

Can't find it. Can't. They alight on me, bite me. I grope for my jacket, my backpack, need to get out. Can't stay anymore. It's their revenge, for attacking them, the beasts, onstage. For threatening them, them and the jackal. The boar, the catfish, the herrings, the cockroach. They've banded together, against me. I've shed their blood.

Now they want me.

They claim me.

The mouse.

It bolts. Into a maze of corridors, tunnels dug out of packed orange dirt. Roots trip it. Sand fills its eyes. Its paws slip and slide. And, behind it, the jackal howls, the boar grunts. The beasts and the horseflies. They're after it, gaining distance. The mouse squeaks, skitters, desperate. It knows that if it falters, it will be dead. The horseflies are close, dark eddy on its tail, it's a matter of seconds. The mouse darts by the turtle's hollow and bursts free, to the sky flecked with stars.

Wind hits its nose. The mouse can't stop, can't pause, not now. It scurries along an asphalt road, its tiny heart throbbing with terror, pelts into a narrow alley. Trash bins, acacia shrubs, parked cars and not a life, no people. A labyrinth of

inner courts and archways. Then, behind a drain pipe, a crack in the wall. A jagged hole. The mouse burrows in, lies still.

Minutes pass.

An hour.

Bit by bit, the girl is back.

I blink, take a breath, lean on the wall. Think. *I should've seen it coming, should've prepared. Where will I go now?* Look around. Square courtyard, desolate, damp after the rain. An empty sandbox, a broken swing and a couple benches encased in an eight-story stone-sack. Most windows dark, a few aglow, one is open, right over my head. Lacy curtains and that smell of fried onions. Someone is cooking something, in the middle of the night, a hunched figure under a naked light bulb. My stomach grumbles.

I get up, stand in the streetlight, in its murky yellow glare. I must be somewhere deep in the bowels of old Moscow. Through the arch at the end of the yard I see streaks of glow, an avenue busy with traffic. A drunk couple wanders by. I hoist my backpack, steal after them. They stop by an entrance, punch in the code, enter. I run up too late. The metal door shuts with a resounding bang.

Not my night, I think.

Bright lights splash over me. Some foreign expensive car rolls along the sidewalk, disappears behind a utility shack.

Good. Maybe I can catch the driver enter the building and sneak in, or find an entrance with a broken lock. I follow, skirt chokeberry bushes, come upon a dead end. It has an aura about it, something...vulgar, cruel.

Voices.

I lurch between the bushes and the wall, watch. Car lights tear out silhouettes. Girls, about ten, in heels, minis, and cheap flashy fur jackets. They smoke, step from foot to foot like ruffled chickens. A man in leather steps out, leaves the engine running, picks out a blonde—she doesn't look more than sixteen—they leave. Another car rolls up. I'm rooted to the ground, breathless. *This is my lot, I think, my future. Pick-a-hooker drive-though. Better this, better someone unknown. Less pain, less humiliation, just a dick. In, out, done. Never to see him again. Never.*

I pick a chokeberry, eat it. Juicy, astringent.

Militia, a model 6 Lada, parks. A couple militants, jeering, unsteady, caps askew, fetch a pair of girls. I gape after them until the red lights get lost in the darkness. *You fucking slime bags.* I want to leave, but I can't. The forbidden, the dirty, it holds me with some unhealthy attraction. I eat so many berries, my belly aches, and it's getting colder, must be about two A.M. in the morning. The last girl is gone. I shiver, frozen, exhausted. No matter. I'll stay awake, wait for some

early riser to open the entrance door, sneak in, nap on the warm top landing...

A hand on my shoulder.

My heart plummets. I wheel around and I already know that I've failed, failed to hear, and now it's too late. I'm trapped. They caught on to me. Who was I to think to escape them? Dumb weakened fool. I gape, can't make out faces, only a low hum of flies attracted to a decomposing roadkill. And then I see them. Young. Smug. Twenty something. Dark beanies, brutish eyes. "Hey, beautiful. Watcha doing here so late? Need a job?" The face. It snorts.

My blood stills.

Hostile sniggers. Five guys block my way. *Horseflies*. My heart returns, pounds in my ears. I don't stand a chance. Some primitive instinct makes me back off and I smash into the bramble. More of it on the right, canes as thick as fingers; solid concrete on the left, the grubby wall of the apartment building. *Irka, you retarded bitch. What led you here? Haven't seen whores before? Why not go to the avenue, where there is light and people?*

They press on, interested, excited. Size me up.

"Look at her. Mum. Why don't you answer?" Says the one closest. I smell the stink of beer, want to punch him in the crotch, scream, thrash, but I do nothing, just stand there,

overwhelmed. *How could I miss them? How could I possibly miss them?*

A hand flicks on a lighter, holds it to my face. "You hear what uncle Roma said? Answer, slut." More insults, and I'm drained, horrified. *No!* I scream inside my head. *Keep yourself together! Fight, fight!*

"Maybe she's, you know...?" Says the one with the lighter.

"Dunno. Ask her." That must be Roma, commanding.

"Hey, you retarded?"

"Nah, she's scared. Don't be scared, you can talk to Roma. I'll be gentle." He bares his teeth. "Won't touch a single hair on your head, only on your pussy." They hoot, crack up, thrilled, nervous. My stomach fills with lead. The darkness of the shadows thickens. "Stupid cunt. Talk, I said!" Roma's eyes grow pissed, spiteful, two compound spheres. His beanie sprouts antennae. A pair of clear wings unfolds from his back. "Is that how it is then? I'll teach ya, teach ya how to talk. Say, *Hello, uncle Roma. I want to suck your dick.*" He grabs my chin. I unfreeze, kick him. It's the last of me. I hang limp in his hold. He chokes me.

It. It chokes me. The horsefly.

Chokes the mouse.

The mouse squirms, tries to bite. The horseflies chase it out of the bushes and into a dank entrance, up the stairs, six

floors, seven. On the eighths floor landing, under the flickering forty-watt bulb, they fall on it and sting it one by one, sluggish, drunk with blood. Their hairy abdomens expand, shake from excitement and aggression. At last the mouse stops the struggle and gives up. They cover it, rise when it twitches, settle, suck on its belly, by the tail, and everywhere they can find vulnerable flesh.

A dog barks behind a door.

Horseflies lift, hang over the mouse. Its swollen from bites, defeated. The dog barks again. Spooked, the flies surge into the shadows and vanish. Tiny bladder lets go. The mouse pees itself, hardly feels the pool of urine, hardly feels anything except the hellish burn from stings. It dimly hears the dog scratch, then the lock, someone turns it. Burble, footsteps. The mouse swims in and out of daze.

In.

And out.

The girl.

I sway, unglue my lids. I'm on a cot, fake leather or oilcloth, something sticky. Medical smell, the whoop of a siren. I'm in ambulance. Everything below my waist is screaming. A woman's face. A nurse, a goose. "Shhh. You're fine. We're ten minutes away." Lulled by the movement, I pass out. Come to when

two pairs of arms heave me up, wheel me between glass doors,
under fluorescent lights.

Hospital, I think, I'm in a hospital.

Calls. Flat, tired. "Natasha, what floor?" This is so loud,
over my head, that I cringe.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Vaginal bleeding."

"Get her on eight. The rest are full."

*Vaginal bleeding, just what I need. I hope your offspring
is gone, Lyosha Kabansky.* I turn my head and retch, grab a
handful of skin on my belly and twist it. Not enough. My pain
alone is not enough. I have so much malice, I need to hurt
someone.

The nurse wheels me into the elevator. The cabin jitters
upward, stops. The doors grumble open.

"Galina Viktorovna!" She yells. "Girls! Someone!"

"What?"

"Got a bleeding one. Where do you want her?"

Fluorescent light blinds me. I squint, strain to hear what
that goose is relaying to a sleepy woman who looks like an
albino mole. Colorless, blind. Must be the nightshift doctor.
She screws unseeing eyes, waves off the nurse, and pushes me
into an examination room. Shabby. Sickly green walls, a bench, a
battered gynecological chair, a desk with an old computer.

She sits, jots something down, studies me silently for a good minute. I study her. No neck, weak eyes and ears, grey hair pulled into a bun, powerful arms. She sniffs the air. "Myshko, Irina Anatolievna?"

I fix my eyes on her, silent.

"What happened?"

I meet her stare.

"Can you hear me?"

Do you care?

"Can you answer, please?"

I lift my hand, decide against it. Drop it.

"Do you have some kind of a speech disorder? Are you mute? Deaf-mute?" She raises non-existent brows.

I gaze back, defiant.

She sniffs. "So, Irina. I don't have all night to sit here and pull information out of you. My ward is overflowing. You think you got it bad? I have a crone here with a vodka bottle up her vagina. A couple drunks broke into her flat, robbed her, and decided to have some fun. Well? How's that for bad? Will you talk now?"

I break into sweat, flinch, mime writing.

"That's better." She gives me an empty prescription blank and a pen. I write, show it to her.

Red splotches crawl up her neck. "What's this?"

The truth, I think. I got attacked by five horseflies. And I hope I had a miscarriage.

She purses her bloodless lips. Washes hands in the tiny sink, slaps on gloves, "Lay still," lifts my shirt, feels my stomach. I bite my lip, to hold the cries. Her fingers enter me, feel about, unceremoniously.

"Last period?"

I shrug. *Does it matter?*

She totters out the door, yells in a surprisingly loud voice. "Laskin! Quick!"

A young balding man shows up. A scrawny shedding weasel, chewing something, brushing crumbs off his coat. "You asked for me, Galina Viktorovna?" His eyes slide over me.

I yank up my panties, cover my breasts, grit my teeth to stay quiet. Moving hurts.

"I need an ultrasound." Says Galina Viktorovna.

"Aha." He hiccups, turns on the computer, squirts jelly on my stomach, smears it with the probe. The screen flickers to life, to a grainy image, white shimmering lines on black.

"Ten weeks, I think..." Says Laskin.

There, in the lines, I see a clot of something white, two bumps on either side. They move, and it hits me. It suddenly hits me. *It's my baby, it's alive.* I begin to shake. *It's waving at me. It doesn't know. Doesn't know that I want to kill it.*

Chapter 6. Eaglet

It's morning. Sun streams through the window at the end of the hallway. Cold, cheerless. Shadows dance on dirty teal walls, curtains move on the breeze from the cracked pane. It doesn't help. The air stinks of medicine, washed floors and unwashed women's bodies. Wall space between doors is occupied by portable beds, on each a girl, my age or younger, in identical hospital robes, some in the company of worried mothers. We wait for our turn, for abortion.

Sheep, I think, a flock of sheep poised for slaughter.

My bed is at the far end. I rub my eyes. Couldn't sleep since they wheeled me here. Tried and couldn't.

The door by the window opens. A stocky surgeon pulls down his mask and yells, "Ovechkina!"

The girl across me, ruddy, plump, sits up. "Me."

"You're next." He withdraws.

Her feet search for slippers. She looks at me, hardly fifteen, cynicism already in her eyes. No mother next to her, only a plastic bag of mandarins. She throws me a suspicious glance, shoves them under the pillow, staggers off.

I smell oatmeal, black bread, and cafeteria tea.

"Breakfast!"

A shrill voice precedes a piggy lady in a greasy apron and a cook's hat. She pushes a steel cart loaded with steaming pots, stops next to me. "For abortion?"

I stare, hungry. I want to eat everything she has. "Yes? No? You can't eat before an abortion, must go on an empty stomach."

I hesitate. How bad will it be if I do?

"Well?"

I shake my head, greedily watch her ladle porridge onto a plate, stick in a spoon, a slice of bread, pour tea.

"Breakfast!"

Doors creak open.

Elderly women in housecoats shuffle out, receive their ration. I slurp hot tea, put the glass on the floor, lean on the wall, plate on my knees, and dig in. The oatmeal is watery, salty. I don't care. Within minutes it's gone. I lick the spoon, lick the plate clean. I'm still hungry. Eat the bread, finish tea, then shamle across the corridor, like I belong, plunge my hand under the pillow and take a couple mandarins. Shove them in my mouth together with the skin. My cheeks grow hot. I hope I can stay long enough for lunch.

A nurse pulls Ovechkina's empty bed into the surgery room, minutes later rolls it out with the girl, an IV attached to her

dangling arm. My heart goes cold. I look at her. Blue lips, paper-thin eyelids, no color in her face. None. She's pale like death.

You killed it, I think, killed your baby. You didn't want it, did you? Maybe it's mercy, to kill the one whom you know you won't be able love. My mama didn't want me. Why did she keep me? She should've disposed of me like I will dispose of Lyosha's swinish brat. I hit my stomach. I want that thing inside to feel my hate.

"Myshko?"

I start. Me already? My pulse quickens. A moment ago I was so sure, so determined, suddenly I don't know anymore, frantic.

"Myshko!" The surgeon calls again, fixes girls with a stare like a wolf on the hunt.

Maybe I shouldn't, I think. Maybe I'll grow to love it...maybe...

"Eat anything today?" A nurse, a stupid goose with a thin neck and big stupid eyes. I can't, can't decide...point to my crotch, to the restroom.

"Be quick about it." She marches off.

I walk over, close the door on the hook, bile in my mouth, stomach warped with anxiety. It stinks of piss and mold in here. A forty-watt bulb hangs by a cord from the ceiling. Cracked

ceramic tile walls, foggy mirror above a sink, a yellowing shower pan behind a plastic curtain.

I don't think long. It's been over a month, over one fucking month. They'll wait. I pee, strip, turn on the water and step into the scalding stream. It burns my face, my breasts, my belly. Steam rises in billows, clouds the mirror. There is no shampoo. Somebody forgot a lump of soap. I pick it up, lather my hair, scratch my scalp until it stops itching, scrub my skin with my hands and nails. It stings between my thighs. I cry out, peel apart every fold and wash myself clean. My skin turns red. I stand under the water, letting it roll over me.

The door rattles. "Who's there?" A woman's voice. "How much longer? I need to use the toilet."

I give a start, open my eyes, and slam into the wall.

Lyosha's face looks at me from the shower curtain.

You can't be here, I think, get out! Out!

It changes, his face. It morphs. Now it's Roma, now one of his mates, now Shakalov. They shift, from one to another, faster, faster. Screech and grimace. The beasts. Horseflies, boars, jackals. Their faces elongate, curdle into maggots. Milky and fat. Their squirming bodies drop right to my feet. I shriek, stomp on them, squish them. It's no use. Gobs of them squirt out of every crack between tiles, boil out of the toilet, crawl out of the sink and drop to the floor with wet smacks.

I hate you, all of you! I trample them, shaking from revulsion. They pop with a hideous squelching noise. More slither over, pulsing, shiny. *Leave me alone!* I press into the corner, want to vomit. It wouldn't come.

The maggots cover the floor, rise in a wave, clump together and take shape. Shapes. Solidify, darken. Grow fur, legs, teeth. The beasts are here, led by the boar. It grunts, the boar, clops its hooves on the edge of the pan, labors over. *You think I can't hurt you?* I want to scream into its piggy face. *I can. I will hurt your brat. How would you like that? How would you like me to murder it?* The boar stops, listens. *It'll be scraped out of me like a hunk of spoiled meat, chopped and flushed down the toilet, dinner for Moscow sewage rats. It doesn't deserve to live. It's ugly, like you. I will kill it! Kill it!*

I work myself into a rage, hit my stomach.

There are voices by the door. It rattles. The rusty hook gives. I hasten to step out. My foot slides, I fall and hit the back of my head on the pan.

Black.

All is black.

No mouse, no girl, just empty blackness. Quiet. Still. I like it. I don't want to leave...I don't...no. The hand. Someone's hand. It shakes me. It.

I come to a throbbing headache, lying face up under a hospital blanket. A face blocks the light. "What were you doing there, trying to kill yourself, or what?" It's Galina Viktorovna, on the edge of the bed. "Shower! Who gave you permission to shower?"

Pain stabs my temples. I wince.

"You could've broken your neck," she sniffs the air, "could've killed yourself. Good thing you didn't have a miscarriage. If not all of it came out, we'd need to scrape you clean, and that could sterilize you." She inflates. "At sixteen! What if you wanted to get pregnant again?"

I don't want any babies, I think. Not now, not ever. Cut it out, cut out my whole uterus.

No. A voice, small, screeching.

I start.

My heart is in my throat. That voice, it's coming from my stomach. I peer down, at own glistening intestines, and underneath them, something small, peeking out. A trembling clot of bloody slime. It raises its head on a bony neck, looks at me. *Butchering me like a pig won't hurt Lyosha, it says. He doesn't care for me. He doesn't even know about my existence.*

What? I think. My head spins. I make out wings, wet folded wings. It's a nestling.

But...I thought...you were an ugly piglet.

I am ugly, but not a piglet, it answers. Though I'd eat one, or a couple, or a whole boar. It clacks its beak.

What are you? I think. Some kind of a...bird?

I'll grow into an eagle. If you let me.

If I let you.

And if you feed me. Boars, jackals, I'm not picky.

Boars, I think. Any boar?

Any. I'm hungry.

"Irina! Are you listening? Now you missed your spot!"

I look at Galina Viktorovna, shake my head.

"What? You're keeping it?"

I nod.

Her face turns spiteful. "All this talk, wasted. Well, do what you like, but you can't stay here. We're not a hotel, you know. I'll sign you out." She leaves.

I change, gather my things—there isn't much to gather—look for the reception desk. Walking hurts. Raw, every bit of my groin is raw, chafing. Can't ride metro like this. "Please call The Chamber Theater, ask if Pavel Baboch can come pick me up. My name is Irina Myshko. Thank you." I give the note to the toad behind the counter. Her mouth is so wide, from ear to ear, that when she opens it, I think her head will split.

"Theater?" She croaks. "You want me to call a theater?" I nod. "Suit yourself." She dials. I wait, gaze at the benches, at

the patients and their visitors. Sitting, talking, groaning, moaning. Sick with this, sick with that.

"Hello? Chamber Theater? First Clinical Hospital calling. I have a girl here, Myshko, Irina..."

I listen, don't breathe, don't blink. What day is it, Monday, Tuesday? Five minutes after twelve. Is he there? He should be. Will he come? Will he—

"First Clinical!" She taps on the counter. "What? How would I know? I see her for the first time in my life!" Tapping stops.

Ilinichna, I think. *Please, Ilinichna*.

"Baboch. Yes. Myshko, Irina." She fires off the address, slams down the receiver. Not a glance, not a word, back to her crossword puzzle.

My heart explodes. He's coming, he's really coming. I drop on empty bench in the corner, in the shadows, stare at the walls. To do something. To calm down. A large round clock, a dead plant in a macramé pot, a san-bulletin board. VACUUM ABORTION OF A NINE-WEEK OLD CHILD. I fixate on it, can't look away. My palms turn clammy. Four illustrations, colorful, graphic. Some strange metal tool in a uterus, a fetus sucked out, crushed, body parts bloody, head torn off, eyes closed, dead. I shudder.

Eaglet? I think.

Silence.

Can I call you eaglet? I put a hand on my belly.

Okay. Same voice.

I swallow, nervous. Just don't go away, don't go. *I'm sorry I wanted to kill you,* I think. *I'm glad I didn't.*

Me too. It says.

I can't think of anything else. Nothing. Nothing to think or to say, so I wait. Count minutes. Ten, fifteen, half an hour. An hour. Every time the doors slam, I flinch. Shoes clack on the floor. Elevator whines up and down. People trickle past me, visitors with flowers, boxes of candy, oilcloth bags stuffed with food. I turn numb, don't hear, don't see, until he's in front of me.

"Irina! What happened?" Kneeling.

I'm afraid my heart beats too loud, afraid he'll hear.

Pavlik. Fine coat and scarf, impeccable, as always. Fresh scent of the street. He talks and talks and talks. I can only watch him. Watch his lips move, his eyes dance with worry, his hair. I want to touch it. Want...to stick my face in it, smell.

"Ilinichna said you needed to be picked up."

I listen, don't listen. And then it's on me, like never before. Hits me. Hard. I almost moan. Debilitating, this. This muteness. I want to say how happy I am that he came, how...I'll never. It's no use. I drop my head, cover my face.

"Can you walk?" He offers his arm.

I grab onto it. *Why? Why is he doing this? Is there...something? Can I hope? Can I?*

And I'm gone.

The girl. Gone.

The butterfly flits by the mouse. And the mouse is weightless. It floats, after the butterfly. Mesmerized by the scales on its wings, black, velvet. The mouse sniffs it. Pollen, pollen and warm wind. The butterfly flutters, somewhat erratic, by a rowan tree with clusters of scarlet berries, by rows and rows of cars. Hospital parking lot, fenced off, encased in asphalt. A couple dusty Volgas, an ambulance van, and a Mercedes. New, shiny. A blue parrot, a macaw, is perched on the rim of the driver's door, its head inclined, eyes impatient.

Kostya, thinks the mouse.

And I'm back.

The girl.

He didn't come alone, he came with Kostya.

Chapter 7. Vultures

I'm a little disappointed. Wish I was alone with Pavlik. Climb into Kostya's car, into expensive smells. New leather, cigarette smoke, foreign cologne. Tinted windows. Grebenshchikov sings from tiny speakers, something about a golden city, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. *An eagle*, I think, stroke the seat, so smooth. Pavlik sits next to me, our knees touch. I freeze. He doesn't notice. My heartbeat deafens me, I don't dare to move. Kostya takes one last drag, flicks the stub, and starts the engine.

The Mercedes rolls forward.

Kostya. I dislike Kostya. He pops in a piece of gum in his mouth. I breathe.

"Where to?" Pavlik asks.

I study my hands, then his eyes. Magnetic and dark. Too dark. If I stare any longer, I'll fall in and I'll drown.

Kostya salutes to the balding guard at the gate. He regards us with indifference. Doesn't care, doesn't see. We merge with traffic, to honks from a large blue truck, BREAD stamped on its side. Large white letters.

"Oh, fuck off! Learn how to drive, *peasant*." Kostya spits.

Peasant, I think. Think of him shot, with a hole in his chest.

"Where do you want us to drop you off?" Asks Pavlik.

I take out my notepad, write. "I don't know."

"Don't know?" He's surprised.

Kostya throws me a sidelong glance. I'm a whim of his friend, dumb mute *peasant*. Or cunt. Pick your insult.

Red light. We come to a sharp stop.

I sit up straight, hear a noise. Far, far away. On the periphery of my hearing. An echo of a blast? I can't quite place it. No, it's nothing. Maybe some engine misfired. Grebenshchikov sings about a girl watching lions. I look. No lions. Dull apartment blocks and hunched figures, like bugs in pursuit of survival. Or vodka. Typical Moscow. No. There is a feeling. It's wrong. It's...what is it? It's coming. Explosive, bloody. My gut chills.

I want to grab Pavlik's hand.

"How about tea at my place?" He says.

"Great idea." Squeezes Kostya, through teeth, another glance at me, revs up the engine. We race ahead, weave in and out of gaps between cars. I feel queasy. Kostya's face is calm, one finger on the wheel, one hand casually speed-shifting. I close my eyes. My stomach jumps to my throat and sits there, throbbing.

Pavlik's voice, a bit strained. "I'd appreciate it if you delivered us in one piece, Kostya."

"You're insulting me." He scoffs. Pops a gum bubble. Blows another. Jaws working, eyes sharp. I'm not welcome, I can feel it. I drill my eyes through his back, willing it to happen.

Another red light.

"Do I sense...hostility on your part, toward Irina?"

"Relax. All is cool. Besides, I'm in no hurry to die, so if you'll excuse me..." His eyes, intent on the road.

I perk up. A feeling is over me, in me. Kostya slams the brakes. We lurch off the seats. "This is just great."

We're at the edge of a massive traffic jam.

"Strange." Pavlik says. "It's never bad here."

"Give me a minute." Kostya rolls down the window, lights a cigarette. City noises drift in. A distant whine of militia.

"Must be another rally." Offers Pavlik. "Pensioners trying to raise Stalin's ghost so he'll end their misery by sending them off to Gulag. Free lodging, free food, free painful death."

I look at Pavlik, and think, *woodpeckers, roosters. Karl Marx, Lenin. Can I tell him? Will he get it?*

"Gulag? Fuck that. I'd rather die onstage." That's Kostya. Chewing. Another bubble.

"Agreed." Pavlik nods.

Same, I think.

"How terribly unoriginal." Throws Kostya. They crack up.

I stop listening. Sit still. Movement catches my eye. A bird lands on a roof of an apartment building. Large, black, with a bald crimson head. A vulture?

"I'm going around." Kostya tosses the cigarette butt, shifts. We reverse, swerve into the opposite lane, skirt a bus. Run a red light on a big intersection. There are honks.

Then, a blast.

Close. Car alarms go off. Pigeons scatter.

"Whoa!" Kostya leans out the window.

"What was that?" Pavlik. Breathless.

Kostya is distracted, slams on breaks just in time, lays on the horn. An old hag in a tattered coat trundles across the street, oblivious of traffic, lifts her cane and slams it on the hood of the Mercedes.

"Hey!" He honks. "You blind bitch!"

She mutters something inaudible, shakes her cane. Her gaze is moronic, anile.

"Did you see that?" Kostya says incredulously, nearly chokes on his gum. "Bitch hit my car!" He's white with fury. Parks, gets out. Towers over her, yells. Arms flying. Hair flying.

Pavlik sighs. "Be right back."

Another blast, louder.

Pavlik ducks. Drivers stop, step out. And the hag, she's...changing. Looking up into Kostya's angry face and changing. My flesh prickles in goosebumps. I hear a new noise. Screams, avian. They rise, fall, loop. *Vultures*, I think, *feasting on a kill...or waiting*. Watch, horrified. The hag turns her head, fixes me with a pair of wet ailing eyes, like she can see me through shadows and glass. Her face crawls with horseflies. They light on her cheeks, her nose, forehead, a buzzing moving mass.

My throat goes dry.

Her nose sharpens, eyes shrink, skin shrivels. Greasy hair falls out in clumps, to a crimson scalp. Arms unhinge, fold backwards. Talons tear through galoshes. Where she stood, sits a vulture. A scavenger. A carcass stripper.

It came for me, I think, to eat me. The mouse.

A second vulture descends. Three more circle above. They snap at me. I recoil.

Kostya and Pavlik are back. Fuming, like after an argument. We turn into Novyy Arbat. Less people here, traffic nonexistent. Two more blasts.

"Look!" Kostya points. "The White House!"

"Holy..." Pavlik doesn't finish.

We're a block away, almost to the Freedom Square. No cars here. People running. On the right, over the roofs, top two

floors of the white latticed multi-story block. Blackened. On fire. Billows of smoke burst from the windows, tongues of flames. Orange.

I hate orange.

Kostya stops the car, gapes.

"Same morons who stormed Ostankino yesterday...Kostya, we need to get out of here." Pavlik turns pale.

"You joking? Where is your patriotism? Love for motherland? This is history of Russia in the making, right in your mug." He is mocking. Trying. His voice is nervous.

"You're so eager to become part of this...history?"

"Let's watch them blow up each other. Free show!"

"Kostya, please." Pavlik tugs on his arm.

"You know what? You bore me to tears sometimes. Don't you want to have some fun?"

"Fun?" Pavlik stares. "You call this *fun*?"

They talk like I'm not there. And it fuels me. This uncalled for strife, this obstinate cockiness, the flames, the orange flames, my helplessness, it all fuels me. Winds me up. I think, *Ostankino, stormed? I can see how that went. A bunch of donkeys with dicks for brains who don't know shit about politics took to the streets. Hey, shooting people is fun. Storming a television center is more exciting than watching TV in a bare-walled kitchen, chugging bootleg. No hope of getting laid, no*

rubles for a whore. Let me play a chauvinist, go gun a couple douchebags to give my hands something to do because I'm tired of wanking.

Kostya drives to the next light. Stops.

We're at the square.

My mouth opens.

Civilians crowd the sidewalk, out in the open. Idiots. Gawking. Tanks by the White House, about ten or so. Shouts, bursts of gunfire. Men with Kalashnikov rifles, behind the streetlights, on top of tanks, aiming, firing. Air smells of smoke. The road ahead is blocked by a barricade. Crates, overturned park benches, street signs, junk. A couple burned out buses, smoldering. People mill between fires like it's a picnic.

A big explosion. The racket echoes off the walls.

"Kostya, you out of your mind? Get us out of here! Now!" Pavlik's eyes are round, frightened.

"Shit, this is exciting." Kostya leans out the passenger window. "Guys! What's going on, any idea?"

"Listen to me!" Pavlik grabs his shoulder.

"Coup d'etat!" Says a bearded man with a camera. Next, I hear a strange whistle. Next, he drops. A dark spot on his shirt. Wet. Grows bigger.

"Snipers! Snipers on the roofs!" Shrieks, shouts.

Vultures, I think, my feet cold.

People scatter, leaving the man to die.

"He got shot. He got..." Kostya just looks.

"Fucking go!" Screams Pavlik.

Kostya shudders, gives gas.

My heart is about to jump out of my chest. More screams, more gunfire. Ambulance whines. Smoke, black acrid smoke. The Mercedes speeds, skids on the corner, lurches. I slam into the passenger door. We fly into a parking lot stacked with prefab metal garages, grind to a stop. Kostya storms out.

"Wait up." Pavlik follows.

I watch them fight under a yellowing elm. Kostya shouts something, Pavlik grabs him by the shoulders, shakes him. Then I hear it. Avian screams, right above me. In seconds, I know what's coming. It's my fault, mine. I said I wanted to see him...I said...I only hope I have enough time. Dash out, locate the noise. *You fucking piece of birdshit. I will kill you!* On the roof of the five-story Khrushchovka sits a vulture. It cocks and aims. I lunge for the elm.

Sky crackles.

A leaf breaks off, seesaws to the ground. Kostya's knees buckle. He sways and topples. I slam into Pavlik. We fall, roll to a stop. Three more shots, in rapid succession. Pavlik shrieks. I don't think, don't feel, just move. Do things. Scramble to my knees and hands, hook Pavlik by the armpits, drag

him behind the tree, away from the vulture's field of vision. Bullets hit the asphalt not two steps away from where we were seconds ago. Hairs stand up on my neck. Sweat trickles down my back, my heart hammers so loud, it's deafening.

"I'm shot... I'm shot..." Pavlik stutters. A shaking hand on his thigh. Blood through his fingers. He looks at me. "Kostya... Where is Kostya..." Blacks out. I can't breathe. For a moment or two. Then I scream. A horrible animal cry. I scream and scream and scream, louder, louder, until my throat burns and I can't scream anymore. Wind ruffles my hair. It smells like it's about to rain.

And I'm myself no longer.

The mouse sits by the butterfly. A black admiral. Its wings are torn, its abdomen cut, dark liquid drips from it, pools into a puddle. The butterfly doesn't move. The mouse squeaks at it, desperate. A bird lay next to the butterfly, a type of parrot. The macaw. Its plumage is so bright and blue, it puts the sky to shame. The macaw doesn't move either, it's very still. There is a horrid gash in its chest.

It's dead.

Chapter 8. Butterfly

I don't remember the ambulance, nor medics or nurses. Only hands. Insistent hands that tried to pry me away from Pavlik. They stopped, after a while. Gave up. I wouldn't let go. Not when they washed him, not when they drugged him. Not when they cut the bullet from his leg. I'm with him day and night. Eat what other patients give me. Stand over his bed. Watch his face, wait for him to wake up. Every day. Every day I wait, for a week.

"You can't stay here anymore." The mustached doctor with big meaty hands. Dark circles under his eyes. A tired walrus. Tired and irritated.

"She sleeps in the closet, Igor Martynovich, by the cafeteria." A man's voice from behind a curtain partition. A couple wet repulsive coughs, then he continues. "Saw her sneak out this morning. Wouldn't you know, here I was, going for breakfast, and there she goes, quiet as a mouse, slipping through the door! And I thought, I said to myself, I have to tell the doctor."

"What is wrong with you? What a bitter man. Let the girl be. Haven't you loved nobody in life?" A wrinkly geezer from

across the room. Most of his head is wrapped in gauze. He props himself up on elbows. "Don't listen to him, doctor. She's no trouble. She loves the boy. Stand over him, from morning till night. Just stands there and looks, and looks..." He grins a toothless smile.

My face grows hot. I want to vanish.

"Let her stay." He adds.

"Yes, let her stay. She's no trouble!" More voices.

All men. All wounded.

"What is it to you?" The doctor rounds on the geezer.

"Should I maybe give her a bed, too? I haven't slept in my own bed since Monday. I got thirty of you. There's hardly any room, and you want me to let her stay? In the men's ward?" He turns to me. "You need to go." But there is no madness in his voice, no spite, only exhaustion.

I squeeze the metal bar of Pavlik's bed, glance about the room. Packed. Overflowing. Thirty patients where there should be twenty. Beds crammed in crooked rows, helter-skelter, some separated by curtains, some not. Tiled walls in need of good scrubbing. Piss pots. IV stands. Fluorescent lights.

I'm not going anywhere, I think. You'll have to make me.

"Listen." He is so close, I smell coffee and cigarettes on his breath. "Don't worry. He'll recover without complications. Compared to the rest of what I have here, it's nothing. His

artery got pierced, big deal. The bullet didn't touch the bone." He massages his temples. "He'll be walking in a few weeks. But I can't have you stay, understand?"

I shake my head from side to side.

"You leave me no choice." He sighs, turns and leaves.

I stare after him.

Minutes go by.

"Irina?" Pavlik's voice, weak. He blinks at the light, licks his lips, struggles to sit up.

I drop to my knees, a big stupid smile on my face. *You're awake! I've been waiting for you to wake up, I've been waiting and waiting and waiting.* I want to say it, out loud. It dies on my tongue, somewhere right by my teeth. I bite my lip, hard.

"Is this...a hospital?" His eyes sweep the room. Wonder changes to dread. "What happened? Where is Kostya?"

I freeze. *Kostya died.* I'm glad I can't say it, suddenly glad of my muteness. Picture him, how his knees buckled, how he fell, his golden hair fanned out on the asphalt. How I thought about wanting to see him shot...guilt. So much guilt, it hurts. And rage. I want to find every one of those vultures, snap their necks. Kill them.

"Where is he?"

I pull the notepad from my backpack. Gives me something to do. Anything, to be away from that question.

"How long have I been out?" He lifts the blanket, studies his bandage.

"A sniper got you." Same voice from behind the curtain.
"Last Monday. Them surgeons took the bullet out, thought you was to stay in coma. Thought you was not to wake."

"Last Monday. So it's been...a week?"

I move my arm inside the backpack.

"Irina, please. Look at me."

I pretend I can't find the pen.

"That man, with the camera. I remember him getting shot.
After that, nothing. Blank."

"She saved your life." From across the room again. The geezer. "Made a tourniquet with her shirt, the doctor told me, stopped the blood flow."

Pavlik looks at me.

I stare at the floor, my face is boiling. *Enough*, I think, *enough, Irka, stop it! Just because you saved his life, doesn't mean that he'll give you his heart on a golden saucer. Get it through your thick skull. Dura.* My hands shake. I see how dirty my sneakers are. The laces. Worn out, threadbare.

"Is this...true?"

I don't lift my eyes, don't move.

"Irina?"

I'm paralyzed.

Pavlik lapses into a pensive silence.

We stay like this for a long time.

Footsteps jerk me out of slumber. Footsteps, headed here. Close, closer. Stop. I lift my head. A middle-aged couple, both in glasses, neatly dressed. The woman is tall, slick, green eyes, dangling malachite earrings. The man is a bit shorter, squatter, ruffled. Wool suit. Greying hair.

"Mama! Papa!" Pavlik tries to sit up.

"Pavlusha." The woman glides to him, props him on the pillow. There is something poisonous in the way she moves, something scaly. She doesn't blink. The man hobbles after her. His eyeballs don't move. He shifts his entire head, looks over me, through me. I step aside.

They kiss. Hold each other.

And I think, *does my mama ever wonder where I am or what happened to me? Am I dead? Alive? Does she care?*

"There you are." The woman's voice is controlled. A tear on her cheek. She wipes it off, fast, as if embarrassed.

"Pavlusha, our dear Pavlusha." Says the man. "We couldn't find you, son...called every hospital in Moscow. We even thought that maybe you—"

"Anton." She cuts him off. That glare, like she just fried him in a brazier.

"Forgive me, Yulechka." His lips in a line.

"Maybe I...what?" Asks Pavlik.

"Nothing." Says Anton. "It's nothing. How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Better, I guess."

They talk. It's all very rudimentary, primitive. Empty. Facts, about things. No, I missed you, I love you. No, I'm happy to see you. I stand an arm away, listen. Pavlik keeps asking about Kostya, they keep dodging his questions.

"Did you see his Mercedes? In the parking lot?"

They shrug, shake heads.

"His father? Did you call him? Did he call you?"

Another shrug.

They know, I think. I can feel it. The way they avert their eyes, avoid direct answers. Dance around.

"Irina?" He looks at me.

I stiffen.

"Don't you remember anything? Anything at all?"

"What is it with you. Kostya, Kostya...let's talk about you." Says Yulia sweetly, sweetly and menacingly.

"I'm fine, mama. I promise." He smiles. It's a strained effort, a practiced stage smile.

"That's the spirit." Anton pats him on the shoulder.

"A leg wound is not a heart wound, right?" Yulia says.

"Right. That's all that matters." She licks her lips. I stare at her tongue. Long, narrow, like that of a snake.

Viper, I think. A venomous viper.

"Why didn't you call us?" A tilt of her head.

Nice bite, that one, right there.

Pavlik recoils. "I just woke from a coma, mama!"

"Well, somebody should've called us." She looks at me, like it's my fault. "Why is it that nobody called us? We thought you were dead!"

"Yulechka!" Anton hoots. And I know what he is. An owl. An old importunate owl.

"Quiet." She hisses. "Can't you see he's distressed?"

"Irina?" Pavlik says to me. Something impish in his eyes. Corners of his lips turn up a little. "Allow me to introduce to you my loving parents. Yulia Davydovna. Anton Borisovich."

I want to grin, hold it, hold it.

A spark flies between us. An understanding.

Yulia and Anton look at me like I'm dinner. Prey. To be torn apart and gnawed on by the viper and the owl. I endure uncomfortable silence. *It's rude, you know, to be fake.* I want to say. *Cuss me out. Please. But spare me this cultured abhorrence.*

"This is Irina. Irina Myshko." Pavlik continues. "My friend and colleague. A very talented actress. Sim says himself."

They wait for me to say something.

"Oh, my apologies. I forgot to mention. Irina doesn't talk." His eyes on me. "She...chooses not to. And, one more thing...if not for Irina, I'd be in a morgue instead of a hospital right now."

"Pavlusha!" Yulia's nostrils flare. "Don't say that! It's bad luck!"

He sighs. "Mama, please, enough."

"A mute actress?" Anton is bemused. "How is...I don't understand. How do you perform if you don't talk? Do you mime? Are you deaf-mute? Is she deaf-mute?" He turns to his son.

"No, papa. I said already, Irina doesn't talk because she chooses not to. She can hear very well."

"Ah. Strange. Why doesn't she talk? There must be a reason, there's always a reason. Maybe a birth defect of some sort?"

Pavlik's face hardens. He doesn't answer.

I said the wrong word at the wrong time to the wrong woman, I think. And I notice the hush, the quiet, the ringing silence in the ward. Patients are eavesdropping, listening in on our conversation. Something to talk about after. Pass some hearsay.

"Did you really save our son's life?" Anton studies me.

"She did!" Cries the geezer from the bed across. "The doctor told me."

Yulia looks at me. They all look at me. The patients. The janitor with a mop. The passing nurse. I shrink, suddenly aware.

Aware of my hair, uncombed for days, my crumpled slept-in clothes, my dirty sneakers. Bad breath, unwashed smell.

"Baboch, Anton Borisovich." He shakes my unresisting hand.

"You never mentioned any Irina to me. How long have you been working together?" This, Yulia says to her son, offer me a hand, tears it away as soon as I touch it. "Yulia Davydovna, very nice to meet you. I'm touched by your interest in my son's life. Thank you, if it's true what you did." She bends to Pavlik, whispers. "You mean, of all the girls in the theater, you pick the one who's mute?"

This is intended for me to hear.

"Mama, you don't understand." Pavlik says with exasperation. "We're *colleagues*. There's nothing between us."

My heart drops and doesn't return. *Nothing between us*. It echoes in my head, on repeat. *Nothing between us. Nothing...* Pavlik says something else, about us being friends, communicating without words, my talent, Sim, audition. I try to listen, and I can't. My ears don't work. My eyes sting. *Nothing between us*, pounds in my temples, *nothing between us*.

Yulia talks about how it starts between friends.

Anton says a mute actress is a profitable sensation.

I flicker.

See them, three figures. People.

Then, the viper, the owl, and the butterfly.

And, gone.

The girl is gone.

A hiss. The mouse looks up. The viper coils and uncoils in a predatory dance. Its jaws unhinge, its fangs drip poison. The mouse peeps and scurries away. The owl claws at it, misses. A heavy thud makes the mouse jump. The walrus. It brays, its tusks gleam with danger. Terrified, the mouse tears for the butterfly. Too late. The owl props it on its wing, the viper slithers next to it. They vanish down the corridor.

The mouse dashes after them. Endless hallways, endless turns. Confused and frightened, it runs in circles, stops and sniffs the air. Fresh rain, right there, weak wind ahead. The mouse starts. Large city noises stun it. Grey Moscow sky, gravid clouds. Rotting leaves in the gutters. And heavy rain, a downpour, a torrent. There they are, the mouse sees them. The viper and the owl get inside a new model 9 Lada, and the butterfly. Drive off.

The mouse watches them, drenched to the bone.

The weather does it. And the cold.

The girl is back.

I stand on the steps of a colonnaded porch. Sklifosovsky hospital. Big courtyard surrounded by a tall iron fence. Behind it an eight-lane avenue heavy with traffic. Cars splash through puddles, spume up froth. Pedestrians bustle back and forth under

umbrellas like wet glistening bugs. Rain drips down my face, under my shirt. It's cold. It's October. I shiver, my teeth chatter, but I can't. Can't move. Can't make a step.

What did you expect? I think. To be invited? Why, because you saved his life? Look at yourself, take a good long look in the mirror. Who needs a fat mute ugly girl without a kopeck to her soul? No one. So suck it up and get moving.

I make myself get down the steps, on the gravel. It crunches under my sneakers. Sheets of rain drape the street, douse me like a shower. A cold windy shower. I let it. Let it chill me. Walk in downpour, without a care.

Pavlik, I think. I will find you, Pavlik.

Chapter 9. Boar

I kick open the metro door. Tsvetnoy Boulevard station. Warm air in my face, like a breath of an underground beast. I sneeze, shake off the water, unzip my jacket. Wring it out, stuff it into my backpack. Merge with the throng of bodies, skip through the turnstyle. I'm on the escalator long before the booth attendant shouts, "Hooligan! Get back! Pay the fare! You have to pay the fare for the transit!" I hold on to the conveyor belt, ride down the inclined shaft, pass under a marble arch, join commuters on the narrow platform.

Electric clock above the tunnel says it's 12:54.

I'm hungry and cold, but I ignore it. Take a breath. Smell damp earth, wet newspaper, cabbage soup and sweat. Somewhere in the tube echoes the staccato of the train. It'll be here any moment, the tapeworm. And the passengers.

Fleas, I think. They're fleas today. Petty. Pernicious. Parasitic.

The beat grows louder. Fleas cram the edge of the platform. I move with them, and then, something behind me, someone. Him. I know it's him. The hairs on my back stand up, my skin prickles. His stare strips me bare. No need to turn, to see. I know. I'm

being singled out for a quickie. A casual public transport frottage.

Hello, boar. I think. Long time no see, bastard.

Boar? It's the eaglet. Can I have it? I'm hungry.

Eaglet! My feet get cold. I forgot about you! I'm sorry. So many things have happened. Pavlik—

It's okay. I forgot about myself too. It gives me a friendly peck. And now I woke up, and I remembered. Will you feed me?

Yes. I think. I will.

My hands curl into fists.

The train arrives. Before the doors fully open, before the exiting passengers have a chance to clamber out, the crowd pushes in, elbows its way through. I let myself be carried with them, grab on to the greasy bar, hang over the bench. Over heads. Heads of those seated.

"Be careful, the doors are closing." Says a bland recorded voice. "The next stop is Chekhovskaya. Dear passengers, please make way for the elderly and the invalids."

Yes, I'm an invalid, I think. Too bad it's not stenciled on my face.

Doors close. Train lurches.

A heavy palm lands on my ass, squeezes it. *You smelly pusbag, I think, scummy fucking freak.*

Are these names for a boar? Asks the eaglet.

Not for any boar, I think, only for this one.

I turn around.

At first I can only stare. Despite my efforts, a gasp escapes me. Lyosha gawps, unblinking, unbelieving. Then he laughs, his big mouth open. Unshaved. Same grimy sweater he always wears, worn to baldness on his belly and elbows. A pair of training pants, his favorite. Easy to slip, easy to pull out the dick. His piggy eyes narrow. He seizes my wrist, yanks me up to his face.

"I'll be damned. Irkadura! Holy gee." He cackles.

The train stops. He drags me out, pushes me against a marble pillar. Leans over. That hangover breath, I nearly puke.

"Surprise!" His speech is slurry. He is swaying. Drunk. Always drunk, more or less, depending on the time of day. "Holy moly! You gained weight, huh? You got fat! Look at you. Look...at...you."

Fat off your cock, dipshit, I think.

"Who'd have thought, huh? Who'd've thought!" He nearly ruptures from laughter, startles people around. I wait for the opportune moment, watch his movements like an eagle. Patient. Sharp. "Vova says, you work for him now." His face darkens. "Whore."

I tense. Hold his gaze.

Can I have it? Asks the eaglet.

In a moment.

It's hurting you.

I don't mind, I think, I'm used to it. Don't want to spook it. When you hunt, you don't attack until you're sure of your aim. I'll hurt it back, just wait and see.

Okay, says the eaglet, but please hurry.

The train departs. The platform is relatively empty.

"Your mother cried herself sick." He spits.

More like drunk herself senseless, I think.

"And here you are, riding around the metro. What did I tell you, huh? What did I say I would do if you run, dumb bitch?" His voice drops an octave. "You fucked Vova, didn't you? He's been looking for you, asking. Slut. Well, I told him, you ain't his, you're mine. And you owe me my share." He lets go of his grip. His hand flies up, to slap me.

Now! Cries the eaglet.

I duck, grip his balls, the soft unprotected sack in the fork of his pants.

Rip them! Screams the eaglet.

I jerk my hand down.

Lyosha's eyes bulge. For a second he is still. Then, a monstrous bellow. He lets go of me. I steal from under his bulk, but instead of running, stand next to him, watching, mesmerized.

His face turns purple. He buckles, clutches his crotch, and hollers. "Fucking...cunt! You will...pay for this!" His cries drown in the drone of the oncoming train.

A small mob gathers around us.

Go, go! Yells the eaglet.

I surface from my stupor and run. Lyosha rights, staggers after me. I hear him, his footfalls, his threats and curses. I dodge and weave through the crowd, along the vaulted vestibule, aim for the exit. My belly aches, my swollen breasts slow me down. Lungs on fire. I won't make it. Won't make it.

A train arrives, spits out commuters.

I stumble, focus on the escalators some twenty meters ahead. Lyosha gains on me, getting closer. Ten steps away, five. Sweat covers my face. My muscles cramp, burn from exertion.

The train! Screeches the eaglet. *Board the train!*

I glance to my right, lurch between the pillars, slip on the polished floor, almost fall. The train is about to depart. "Be careful," says the voice, "the doors are closing. The next stop is—"

I know the recording by heart. Five seconds left, two meters to cross. Then, Lyosha's hand. It gets hold of my backpack. I shoot forward, leaving it in his grip.

"...Tsvetnoy Boulevard." Says the voice.

The doors begin to close, move like in slow motion. There is a gap, just wide enough. Just...I groan, leap and crash inside. The doors bang shut. I double down, gulp for air. Knives pierce my side. I force myself to straighten.

DO NOT LEAN, it says on the glass. Lyosha stands behind it, so close, he fogs it up, shakes my backpack, yells something. His eyeballs are about to pop from his sockets. Round, bloodshot.

And I grin. *Eat that, fuckface.* I think. *Eat that, you swine. You sack of shit. You degenerate pervert.*

Those balls tasted good, says the eaglet. *When can I have the rest?*

Soon, I think, flip Lyosha two birds and watch him grow smaller and smaller.

The train picks up speed, enters the tunnel.

For the next two stops I'm in ecstasy. Don't feel my legs, don't know how I can stand upright. Don't mind the lost backpack, jacket, my disability certificate. It was worth it, losing it, worth it. My shirt is damp, sticks to my back. I hardly notice, totter out on Medeleevskaya, drag myself up worn steps of the crossover to Novoslobodskaya. White-washed cavern, stuffy air, grim shuffling bodies. An Afghan war veteran on a piece of cardboard, twenty-something kid with no legs, brays army songs. A newspaper hag sells yellow press. A pensioner

begs. I grin at every one of them, as if I'm drunk, as if I don't mind them, pesky metro fixtures.

I thought that pig a lesson, I think. I did.

I descend to the station, a crypt with illuminated pylons, walk onto the platform, and hear a voice.

"Citizen Myshko!" Asks Lenin from a stained glass panel.

"You still haven't answered me. What is your goal in life?"

To shut you up, I think. To live to the day when you will listen to me, and not the other way around.

"Believe in the Soviet power! It will return your speech! Do you doubt it? Do you doubt it, citizen Myshko?" He rattles on, an accusatory finger pointed at me. Chiding.

The only thing I doubt is if you can stick it up your ass, this Soviet power, because your fingers are too fat for your tight proletariat asshole.

I board the train, get out on Kievskiy, transfer to the blue line and exit on Smolenskaya. It drizzles lightly. The sky is muddy with clouds. I rub my arms, stop by the line of vending kiosks. A shoe repair booth, a newsstand, a cigarette stall. Passersby halt, study displays, exchange rubles for goods and move on. The street bustles with traffic, smells of exhaust and dampness. *I'll walk to the White House, I think, find my way to Pavlik from there.*

Place my hands on my belly. *Thank you.*

For what? Asks the eaglet.

For egging me on.

No, says the eaglet, thank you.

For what? It's my turn to wonder.

For not killing me.

Oh, I shudder, I'm sorry.

No. Don't be. Every mother wants to kill her child at least once in her life. You're not the first, not the last.

Is that true? I think. How does that make us different from animals?

People, you mean? It doesn't, says the eaglet. People are animals, they just deny it. They believe because they learned how to walk upright, how to think, how to talk, that they're somehow better, smarter, but they aren't. They kill each other every day. They're worse than animals.

How is that?

Animals kill for survival. What do people kill for? For fun.

But...you wanted me to kill Lyosha.

No. I wanted you to kill the boar.

I shake my head. Wait.

I'm the animal in you, not the mouse. Says the eaglet. Let me out. It's final, the way he says it. I can hear that it's final. There is no more talk.

I'm cold from standing outside for so long in a damp shirt. Cold and tired, and I want to pee. I touch my temples, my cheeks. My face is hot, boiling. So I march, to get warm, and to do something. To move, to stop thinking. March into a pedestrian underpass that smells of puke, get out on the other side of the street, weave in and out of back alleys, reach the Moscow river embankment. It's getting dark. I head north, along the stone balustrade, watch water like in a trance. Trucks lumber by. Streetlights whiz to life.

I'm there, and I'm not. See, and don't see. Hear, don't hear, in my head. *Let the animal out*, I think. *Let the animal out*.

Freedom Square.

I pass by the remnants of the barricade, meander through the streets for another hour, grope inside my memory for landmarks. Buildings. Roofs. Anything I saw, anything that might lead me on. This. It's something I remember. A peeling church. Behind it, a daycare, two dismal concrete blocks. I hop over the fence, cross the yard, ignore the smoking boys on one of the verandas, pretend I didn't hear them call me, swearing, jeering. This is it, on the other side. The boulevard, the parking lot, the elm, now almost bare, and the model 9 Lada. Their car. Across the entrance to a five-story brick Khrushchovka.

I can't hold it any longer, squat behind the tree.

A fat old woman in a kerchief labors out of the front door. A leash in her hand, a black cocker spaniel tugs on it, sees me, barks. Loud, hysterical. She shushes it, "Quiet, Nika, quiet!" gives me a stern glance. "Walking here, pissing everywhere, devil's bums. Curse you!"

I wait for them to clear, pull up my pants.

Suddenly, I'm angry.

Angry at being cold, hungry, poor, and alone. Angry at her dog, her outburst, angry at this ugly building where Pavlik lives, at not knowing his apartment number, at everything. A crow croaks at me. I pick up a stone and throw.

There! I think. Is that the animal you want?

The crow flies off, screeching. I flip it a finger, walk up to the entrance. The coded lock is broken, gutted. The door gives a creak. A foul odor hits my nostrils, something rotten, something spoiled.

Stairs are gloomy, barely lit. It's cold, like in a grave. No elevator. Typical Khrushchovka, the prefabricated Soviet housing wonder. *Want a free apartment?* I think. *Sure, let's stuff you here. Sorry, no insulation, no elevators, but hey, it's good for health. Jogging up and down the stairs. Sucks if you're an invalid.* I think about that kid I saw, the veteran without legs. *I get the Soviet power, Lenin. If I don't fit its dogmas, I'm ostracized. Discarded. Good as dead.*

A hand brushes my ankle. I shriek.

On the first floor landing lies a drunk, unshaven, filthy. "Daughter! Help me!" I offer him a hand. He slaps it. "No! Rubles! I need...rubles!" An empty bottle of vodka rolls away from him, his crotch is stained with urine. I hold the urge to kick him, edge around. He snatches at my leg, slurs curses.

I sprint up the stairs, press my ear to every door, listen. Sounds of TV, Vysotsky songs, a couple has a fight, a baby cries, a dog is woofing. Most are quiet. Something tells me I have to keep going, something...on the last floor. The fifth. The doors, the second on the left is cleanest. And I know. It's new, painted metal, number 18. I peep into the spy-hole and the smell...the smell of meat dumplings. My stomach rumbles. I hit it, mad at it, it wouldn't let me hear. Soft voices, clinking cutlery. They're eating dinner. Footsteps. A cough, and then.

"Pavlusha, tea! It's getting cold. Yulechka, I'll go take out the trash."

I found him!

The door chain jingles and the tumblers turn.

Chapter 10. Viper

My heart shoots out of my chest. I skid down three flights of stairs, cling to the garbage chute. DON'T THROW BURNING MATCHES AND CIGARETTES INTO THE GARBAGE CHUTE is stenciled on it in big red letters. The receptacle shutter yawns open. Rank odor issues from its depth. I gag. Puppies. Dead puppies. Grandma used to throw them down the chute, after she drowned them in the bucket of water.

Steps above, the flapping of slippers. A groan of a rusty hinge, an echo of the garbage thudding through the shaft, a crash, somewhere down. Slippers shuffle up. The door bangs shut.

I listen to the echo, wait a couple minutes, then take a breath, ascend, and ring the bell.

An eye peers into the spy-hole. I brush my bangs aside and smile. There is movement. Locks click and the door opens to the length of the chain. Yulia's unblinking eye studies me for good ten seconds, like she hasn't seen me before. "Excuse me, but...who are you?" She either doesn't recognize me, or pretends like she doesn't.

I go through the pantomime.

"Ah, you're that girl from the hospital."

I nod, relieved.

"Well, this is unexpected. Did Pavlik invite you?"

I shake my head.

"No? Then why are you here? And where did you get our address?" This comes out as a hiss.

"Mama, who is it?" Pavlik's voice.

My pulse quickens, face turns hot. I hate it, but I can't stop it. I'm blushing.

"The neighbor...Tatiana." Calls Yulia over the shoulder.

"Asking for butter." She turns her unblinking eye at me. "What is that you want?"

I take a step forward.

She shuts the door to a crack. "Don't come closer. Answer. What are you doing here and what do you want."

Anton whispers behind her. "Surely she's here to see Pavlusha." Interest in his voice. Intrigue?

"And how does she know where he lives?" Hisses Yulia. "How do I know she's not a scam artist?"

"Why, they work together...Pavlusha said—"

"Pavlusha said. Pavlusha likes to tell stories." An ardent whisper clearly meant for me to hear.

"What is it?" Pavlik calls. "Who're you talking to?"

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing." Yulia shuts the door.

My heart cracks over the concrete floor. I flex my fingers, lost, not knowing what to do. There is noise in my ears, it's ringing. No. That's not it. It's the chain. It rattles and the door flies open. It takes me a moment, before I can lift my head and look.

Pavlik, so close, an arm away. He leans on a pair of crutches. Peaked, alert, dressed impeccable, as always. Dark sweater, jeans, leather slippers. "Irina!" His eyes light up. "How did you find me? Well, don't just stand there, please...come in. I'm so glad see you."

Are you? Really? My stomach flips. I stare, to stop myself from crying.

"I'm sorry we left in a hurry, papa had— Oh. You're wet...you're frozen! Where is your jacket?"

I step inside. It's so warm, my fingers start to tingle.

Pavlik shuts the door, locks it.

I goggle.

The narrow hallway and what little I can glimpse of the parlor is surgically clean, organized to precision. Everything looks new and expensive. Embossed wallpaper, polished mahogany furniture, Turkish rugs, satin lampshades, crystal chandeliers, Gzhel plates on the wall, a glass bureau filled with trinkets. Sparkly, glossy.

I could eat off the floor here, I think.

Anton stands at the end of the hallway. Homey, casual. Next to him Yulia looks festive, in a green dress and large emerald earrings, arms crossed, face a mask of politeness.

"Irina, right?" She says.

I nod.

"Well, Irina. I'd like for you to explain to us the goal of your unexpected visit. Pavlusha, fetch her pen and paper."

"Mama, please, not right now."

"Yulechka, they're friends. It's natural for friends to visit each other, don't you think?" He tries for a smile.

"Natural. Since when is visiting people unannounced is *natural*? She could've called, at least."

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

"I know what Pavlusha said, no need to remind me." Her unblinking eyes drill me. "How old are you?"

I show with my fingers. *Sixteen.*

"Sixteen? Wandering alone, at night, after all this shooting. Do your parents know you're here?"

I smirk. *Well...my papa ditched us before I was born. My mama is drunk most of the time, and her boyfriend doesn't qualify as a parent, because he fucked me, against my will, every night. For a year. So no, my parents don't know that I'm here because they don't give a shit about where I am or whether I'm alive or not.*

"Mama, you're always so warm and welcoming." Says Pavlik. I can almost see the sparks flying. Before she can answer, he grimaces as in in pain, leans on the wall. "Let's continue at the table, if you don't mind. It's a bit hard for me...to stand for so long."

Yulia turns and leaves. Anton hastens after her.

And I think, *never mind my folks. At least they stab in the open.*

Pavlik smiles, grimace gone. "Do you like dumplings?"

I could eat a fried snake right now, I think. Hell, I could eat one raw.

He points to the wardrobe, "there should be an extra pair of slippers..." says something else, but I don't hear. A premonition strikes me. A portent. A picture...of what, a scene, a room, where? The warmth around me, the colors, blend into orange. Orange. The exact shade of those wretched curtains. The glow and the sparkle turn gluey, sticky. If I make a step, I'll get stuck, squeaking, helpless little mouse. Stuck in a viper's lair.

My choices. Simple. To be poisoned by a viper or to be guzzled by a boar. I decide to stay. For dinner, then for a couple days, then for a couple months.

Pavlik convinces his parents that my company is therapeutic, that it helps him heal faster. Anton agrees on the

account of debt. Life debt. It needs to be repaid. I suspect he feels magnanimous by proving a refuge for a mute homeless girl. I'm his charity of the year. Yulia is reluctant, suspicious, then impressed with my mopping and scrubbing and cleaning. She even sends me grocery shopping. I honestly steal only from the store, never from her stash. Sleep on a mattress on the floor in the kitchen, put it away every morning. It's my room, my own room. I've never had my own room. It's packed with food, the perfect mouse cage.

Rain gives way to freezing wind. And snow. Snow everywhere. It covers dirt, coats Moscow with a white crystal blanket. It's winter now, and I change. I gain weight. My breasts swell up, my belly grows like some kind of a carcinoma, both malign and benign. It will rupture me, it will. I'm scared to death of being ripped apart by the eaglet, eager to get out. I dress in layers, in Yulia's hand-me-downs. They haven't noticed anything, Yulia, Anton, nothing. Only Pavlik.

He gives me looks, keeps mum.

Until today, first Saturday of December. I've felt his stares since morning. He's going to ask me, he's going.

We're alone, eating breakfast in the kitchen. Yulia and Anton have gone to prepare their store for a jewelry exhibition. Behind the window snowbanks glisten in the sun, their slopes bored with yellow doggy pissholes. Pedestrians wade through

slush strewn with salt by the blue-and-orange snowblowers. The clock strikes ten. I finish my third cookie and sip tea, waiting.

Pavlik sits across the table, in the dappled shadow, his eyes distant. He forks up the last of the sunny-side up egg, gulps coffee. No crutches by his side, gone since last week. He gets up. "Coming?"

Anytime, I think, *always*. Brush off crumbs, follow him to the heated covered balcony the width and the length of a daybed. Pine walls, a folding table, three padded stools, cardboard boxes in the corner, a pulley clothesline under the ceiling. I like it here. The hours we spent here, too many.

Pavlik cracks open the window, pulls out a pack of Davidoff's, matches, lights a cigarette, takes a drag. Freezing air drifts in. My skin erupts in goosebumps.

He puffs smoke. Coils, ringlets. There is no wind, only hard frigid sunshine. The inner court is spread five stories below like a bleached hanky. "So, um..." he says, not looking at me. "I wanted to ask you something. If you don't mind."

I don't, I think, *I know what it is*, sit on a stool next to him.

It's been two months since Kostya's funeral, since Pavlik started smoking. He's still awkward with it, holds the cigarette

like a child a spoon. My shoulder by his thigh, his warmth. I don't dare to breathe, to move, want to press closer, to—

"Listen," he says, "you can't hide it forever, you know. Look, it's already...oh, dammit...it's not how I wanted to—Irina?"

I look up.

His hand in his hair. Eyes anxious. "I know that you're pregnant." He says it fast and deflates, like it took all the strength out of him.

And I want to say, *Just for a moment, can I ask? Just for one moment. Suppose...suppose I'm suffering from denial. So what? For once I'm so fucking comfortable, I don't want to disturb it, to dredge up the past, to be reminded of him, is that so bad? I know I'm sitting in shit. I don't care! I don't want you to stir it, because it will stink. It will stink and spoil everything. Please, it's such a nice morning.*

"I...I talked to Sim yesterday." He looks away again. "What if he offers you a role? Here it's okay, they think you chubby, only I'm not sure about mama, I have this feeling...but onstage! Onstage? How will you hide it onstage? You can't, Irina. You'll get too large and, what are you going to do, tell him you have stomach cancer or something?"

I smirk. *Yeah, something like that. Stomach cancer sounds about right.*

"Why did you keep it?"

I wince. *Again? Do we have to do this again?*

"Why did you go to the hospital for an abortion if you didn't do it?"

I study feet.

He plops next to me, takes my hands. "Can I ask...who the father is?"

I flinch. *Is he mocking me?*

No. He isn't. His face is pallid, tense, a face of someone who cares but doesn't quite know how to express it and is ashamed and bewildered for that reason.

"Look, I'm sorry if I seem too forward about this. I didn't mean to...I see how you look at it, touch it, your belly, and—I promise, I won't tell anyone, please, believe me, if that's what you're afraid of. I just want to help. In case you wanted to talk—"

Talk, I want to laugh. I've forgotten how to want it.

"—to tell someone about...whatever it is. It'll die with me. You have my word." His face hardens. "And I wish you'd stop giving yourself those nasty bruises." He breathes fast now, his face is flushed with unhealthy color. "Irina. I wouldn't be sitting here, talking to you, if not for you, do you understand? I wish I could help you somehow, in return, don't you get it?"

I freeze. *Why did I do?*

Then, at once, I'm in his arms. He holds me. His cheek on mine, his breath...I'm so surprised, I'm paralyzed, panicked. I wanted it so bad, for so long, that now that it's happening, I can't move. My heart drums hard, I'm about to pass out. And I know that I failed, failed my fight. I can't fight anymore. I give up.

This moment, it strangles me. It slaps me.

I'm in love.

You dura, I think, you mute stupid dura. He said there is nothing between you, don't you remember? But I can't...can't stop, it's too late. I don't care, don't care anymore. I just love him.

"Something wrong?" Pavlik lets go.

My face is wet. *Yeah, like, everything?*

He frowns. "Did I hurt you?"

I simper. *You? Hurt me? No, I hurt myself. I'm exceptionally good at it, you know.*

He pulls out a cigarette, puts it back. His hands shake.

"Can I ask you something?"

I dry my face with a sleeve, nod.

Outside kids call to each other. A dog barks. A car honks.

"I know people must bother you with this all the time, but...why is it that you don't talk? If it's okay for me to ask. Please?" He pulls out a notepad and pen from under the stool.

He tried this trick before. Maybe this time I should.

What's to lose? Maybe.

I flip through pages filled with my crooked writing, empty things, elusive answers to his questions, find a clean one. Hold the pen over the paper. The tip almost touching, almost. *I know, I think, know how to find out if it's is simple gratitude, or if there is something...more.*

I begin to write.

Chapter 11. Eels

It's hard. Words don't want to come. They resist me. They don't belong here, they live inside my head. They...every letter is a struggle. Like two magnets, pen and paper. Opposite ends. They push against each other and I begin to sweat. It's one thing I can't talk, now this? It gets me angry, and it breaks it. My anger. The resistance. I write three words.

"No one knows."

"What do you mean?" He says.

"I haven't told anyone why I don't talk."

"No one at all?"

I shake my head. Much easier, this. To shake my head, to nod. Convenient habit. I'm mad at it, mad at my tongue that won't move, at my trembling hands.

"Thank you." He says. "For sharing it with me."

Thank you? I gape at him, aghast. *Did you say, thank you?*
For what? In a moment you won't thank me any longer.

My heart thunders hard, harder. I grip the pen, to keep it rooted to the page. "I don't talk," I write, "because the catfish made me not to." Squint up at Pavlik, wait for his reaction. Wipe my forehead. Sweat. I broke sweat.

"What?" His brows knit.

Here it comes, I think. Go on.

He reads and rereads my words, his face so close to mine, I smell his skin, see his lips moving. Then he studies me for a good minute. A crow screeches, another answers. They fight, by the sound of it, for a scarp of food.

I wait, my stomach in knots. There will be disappointment, or he'll tell me I'm mental, need to be seen by a doctor, or laugh it off, think it's a joke, or—

"Why?" He says, quietly, strange light in his eyes. "What did you do to it? To the catfish?"

I gawk. No ridicule in his eyes, no scorn. He fumbles with a cigarette, breaks it. Pulls out another.

I take a breath and write. "I called it a bad word."

"What word?" He asks.

"*Dura.*"

"And what did it do?"

"It chased me, so I turned into a mouse. Mice can't talk."

"Mouse? You're a...mouse?"

"Yes. That's why I don't talk." I want to cry now. I want to drop the notepad and the pen and curl up on the floor and weep and weep until—

"Does the catfish know..." he hesitates, "...who's the father of the—"

I shake my head. "No. The catfish is my mother. The boar is the father of—" I can't finish. I don't want him to know about the eaglet. Don't want him to ask questions.

"The boar?" He drops the cigarette, picks it up. "Do the catfish and the boar know each other?" Every word measured, careful.

"They live together, if you can call it living."

His hand on my shoulder. "Does the boar know?"

"No."

"What did it do to the mouse?" He whispers now.

"Ate it." I write. "Tail to neck. Every night. For a year."

"Is that why you got in the hospital? Because it hurt you?"

"No, that was horseflies. Five of them."

"Five horseflies." He repeats, stares at the window like it's not there, like it's nothing. "Did they...bite you?"

"Yes. Worse than the jackal." I don't know why I wrote it, scratch it out. He stops my hand. "Wait. The jackal? There's a jackal?"

"The one from the Chamber Theater."

Pavlik is still for a couple seconds. Then his eyes narrow. "That scum. And I thought it was empty rumors about Lida—did it bite you?"

"Only a handful of times. It's old. Its teeth are dull and it's—"

Images flood me. My throat spasms, chest hurts. My mouth tastes cruddy. They want out, the beasts, the stories. I begin writing, fast, faster, everything. About everything. The bed in the woods, the catfish and the boar, sleeping, the cockroach, the herrings, Lenin killing woodpeckers, the tapeworm, the roosters, the turtle in the theater, the seal and the parrots, mole, sheep, vultures, walrus...but no eaglet, no viper, owl, butterfly or macaw.

The street grows quiet. It's evening.

I'm bursting. Drop the notepad, rush out to pee. Return.

Pavlik throws his fifth or sixth cigarette stub out of the window, looks at me strangely. "I have a story too."

I grope for the stool, to sit.

"Nobody knows this except my parents." His voice is muffled. I can tell he's nervous. "I was seven. Walking home from school, right by the riverfront, around six in the evening. It was December, like now, cold and dark. I should've known better. Should've gone home right after school. But that chickenshit from third grade, Mishka, hid my schoolbag behind the trash bins and it took me hours to find it. Hours! I was afraid mama would scold me if I came home without my bag. So I get to the bridge, turn to go up the stairs, and...there they were." He stops, eyes unfocused.

I can feel his animal terror.

"Six of them." His pupils expand. "Six...eels. Black, scary, spiny. Stoned out of their minds. They—" his face contorts with pain, "—fell on me and...burrowed in. One after another." He's stockstill, absent. "When they got done, they left me. Right on the icy steps. And I lay there and I looked at the sky, at the stars like bits of ice on velvet, and I thought, this is it. I'm dying." There is water in his eyes, about to spill. He wipes it quickly.

I'm dumbstruck. *You too? No, it can't be. It just can't be.* I want to reach out, but I'm so afraid he'll reject me, I can't do it. Lift my hand, drop it, lift it again and write. "One of the vultures shot the macaw. In the parking lot by your house. I saw it."

"What?" Pavlik nearly jumps. "The vulture, what?"

"It was on the roof. It shot the macaw and the butterfly."

"The macaw and the butterfly?"

"A black admiral. It lived, but the macaw died. The mouse pushed the butterfly out of the way. The mouse wasn't fast enough—"

Pavlik covers his face.

I toss the notebook, forget myself and hold him. He doesn't push me away, he doesn't. He just sags. And...his hair, so close. Black, curly. I pass my fingers through it. It's velvety, like I expected. Rock him a little. He weeps into my sweater. We

sit like this for I don't know how long. It gets dark, very dark. I can't see my hands. Then, bright yellow light flares on. Like a flash, sudden. I wince. The parlor. Someone is knocking on the glass.

Pavlik stirs. I blink, blinded.

Yulia's face, brows up in wonder. Anton smiles. Happy?

What is it that...my arms, my hands. We're still holding each other! I jump up so fast, the edge of my sweater lifts. Bare skin, bare...*Shit!* She looks. Her eyes, her mouth. I tug it down, smooth it over. My face is near the boiling point.

"Hey," Pavlik opens the door, "sorry. We've lost track of time. Mama, you okay?"

Yulia's eyes fix on me. She throws a hand over her mouth.

"Yulechka, what's the matter?" Says Anton.

She points at my belly, like she wants to poke it, drill a hole in it and watch it deflate. "This..." Is all she can manage. "This..."

I try to look innocent, but the damage is done.

"What is it?" Anton follows her finger.

Pavlik's face falls. "You guys hungry?" He's trying to avert it. "How about some dinner? We've been sitting here all day—"

"Pregnant." Yulia whispers. "She's pregnant!" Not a muscle twitches in her body. She's rigid, the viper in attack mode.

"Say what?" Anton blinks.

"Can we come inside, please? Thanks." Pavlik steps over the threshold, pulls me behind him. My legs turn to water.

Yulia's arms cross over her chest. Fast. She's fast. Starts without preamble, already poised, controlled. "How long has this been going on?" Her voice quavers, that's all that gives her away.

I'd prefer it if you yelled, you egocentric hypocrite, I think, suddenly mad. Be honest and say it to my face, why can't you? Say you hate me. Say you want your son to be rich and famous, married to a girl who can shit diamonds and not some knocked up dummy without a kopeck to her name. Say it! Come on, say it! I grit my teeth. This again, this yearning, overwhelming. I want to speak, to scream. I hate her enigmatic tone, her iron self-control. It's poison, viper poison.

I tug on Pavlik's sleeve. He doesn't respond.

"What are you talking about?" Anton, still puzzled.

"She's pregnant, what's what!" Yulia snaps.

"Pregnant? Surely you don't think—" he cuts himself off, shifts his gaze to Pavlik.

"Do you consider me incapable in that regard, papa?" Says Pavlik with venom.

Oh, no-no-no, I think. Don't do that. Try Pavlik's sleeve again, he steps away from me.

"Watch your tone, son." Anton warns.

"I'm sorry, what exactly is it that I should watch?" Pavlik voice is high, unnatural.

"All this time, right under my nose." Yulia pins him with a burning stare. "You never hid anything from me...you always told me everything, Pavlusha, *always*. Why?"

No! I think, grab Pavlik's hand. He twists it out of my hold. I'm confused, terrified. *What did I do wrong?*

"Us." Corrects Anton. "Told us everything." He's beginning to catch on, his neck reddens, eyes bulge.

Yulia turns green. "It this how you repay us? For everything we've done for you? This is what you do?"

Pavlik's face is working, and it doesn't look good.

I want to shout at them, *it's not his, it's not!* Reach out to Pavlik, and he...why? This look he gives me. Why? What's wrong? What...I'm lost. Emotions flood me and I can't stand, I need to sit, back off, drop on the sofa. Stare at the mahogany console, at the TV on the top, covered with a crocheted hanky. Unfeeling, unhearing. It's over, all over. *Good job, Irina Myshko*. I think. *He doesn't want you, nobody wants you. Get ready to be kicked out. Where will you go now? In the middle of winter? Pregnant? What will you eat, where will you sleep? Whose ass will you kiss, to make them take you in?*

"Please, let's be civil. There is no need for this animosity. I can—"

Yulia towers over him. "Animosity? I almost lost you once, and you're talking to me about animosity?" She hisses at her husband. "Anton, don't be quiet. Say something!"

"Of course, Yulechka, of course." He studies me through his glasses. "Irina, tell us, please. Are you, in fact, pregnant?"

They all look at me. I shrink into the sofa. Can't move, can't nod and hate myself for it.

"What are you asking her for?" Yulia explodes. "Like she'll admit to it." She glares at me, her eyes livid. "You hoodwinked us, lied to us. You coerced my son into this...affair! After everything we went through, all the pain and suffering, you come and wreck his future. We trusted you, we took you in, fed you, clothed you. And you..." She catches her breath, veins prominent on her neck. "You trash! You insolent licentious bitch! You—"

"Mama, drop it!" Pavlik cries.

No, I think, strangely mad. Let her. She's finally telling me what she really thinks.

"Don't yell at your mother!" Hollers Anton.

"Then tell her to stop yelling at Irina!"

"Lift your sweater, please." Yulia says quietly.

I cover my belly, automatically, as if to protect it, and it jolts. It. What's inside. Inside me, moves. A passing

feeling. Like a shift, a touch...I look down. It's real, this sensation. Immediate, present. Then another, a floating. Like...the baby inside me is moving. I gaze up, my mind blank. They're arguing. Waving arms. Anton has froth on his lips. Yulia is somehow stringy, as if she lost all water from her body, dried out. And Pavlik between them, hands up.

He sees me, my stare. His eyes go wild. He's about...*don't do it*. I'm rooted to the sofa, can't stand up, can't reach him, can only wag my head. *Please, don't. Please.*

He passes air between his lips, and I hear it, like in a dream. Hear it. He says, "It's my life, my baby. *Our* baby. If you want no part of it, it's your choice. We'll figure things out on our own."

I hiccup from surprise. *What are you doing, Pavlik?*

"We raised you." Says Yulia, teary now. She's done with her biting, on to the next tactic. "We got you into one of the most prestigious Moscow schools, we're paying your way through theater, bending over backwards for Sim to help your career, and you go on and lie with some...hussy! You're just a child, Pavlusha. You're only eighteen! Do you realize what this will do to you? It will ruin your life. It will—" She gropes for words.

"What do you know about bending over backwards." He throws with spite.

Yulia goes pale. "Don't say this. Don't. Don't you dare."

I battle.

The mouse, it's there. Almost there. But I battle, I must, I need. I can stop him, I can. I can tell them. The truth. The mouse. The girl.

I flicker.

"That's why you were so adamant she stayed!" Wails Yulia. "That's why you brought her here, for us to get used to her! You planned it all along, didn't you? You...you counted on us to raise your brat while you two skip onstage, having the time of your lives! Well, I won't have it, you hear me? Over my dead body!" She's high-strung, her eyes wet and narrow.

The girl.

The mouse.

The girl.

The baby moves again. The eaglet. It's real.

I've felt you, I think, eaglet, I've felt you!

And I lose it. I'm gone.

The mouse squeaks. The parlor shrinks to a dirt-hole. The owl hoots, rises. The viper uncoils. They scare off the butterfly, descend on the mouse. Prod it, poke it, flip it over, jab its belly. The mouse is oblivious. It feels the eaglet flitter in its stomach, wanting to come out, to become a grown bird. A predator. Large, strong, imperious. The one that can

kill the viper and the owl and the boar and any beast that dares to hurt the mouse.

The mouse peeps, content.

It will let *it*, let the eagle out, even if that means the eagle will destroy the mouse in the process.

Chapter 12. Macaw

A door slam jolts me back. I surface, sit. It's night. I'm on Pavlik's creaky bed draped with a handwoven carpet. A ring of light on his writing desk, from a table lamp. A jean jacket on the back of a chair. Posters on the wall. Sim, Kostya, some other actors. A backpack on a Turkish rag, a stack of books. Everything is neat, clean. Organized. Last time I was here it was after the funeral. Last time he let me in, last time...my belly. It aches and churns.

I reel.

Pavlik. He stands next to me. I smell him. Pollen, bitter flower dust. His hair is ruffled, eyes are grim, reckless. "Feeling any better?" It's not what he wants to say. I can sense it. So I wait.

"You know what?" He snaps. "I told them to piss off and leave us alone. Don't know about you, but I'm done. And I don't want you sleeping in the kitchen anymore. Take my bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

He pulls his turtleneck over his head and throws it on the chair. Next goes the muscle shirt, jeans, socks. Briefs, is all that's left. Starkly white. He looks around in search of

something. And I shrink, expand, shrink again. Pulse. Throb. Blood thumps in my head. I stare at him, milky from the lack of sun, but not deathly pale. No. Lucid. And the black of his hair, the contrast. I become aware of...my fingers, my hands tingle. I want to touch him, his skin, like I touched his hair on the balcony. I want. I don't dare.

What if he doesn't...

I know.

I unbutton my shirt.

Pavlik unrolls the mattress, takes a plaid woolen blanket from the wardrobe, shakes it out.

I strip-takes me less than a minute—shake with anticipation. I've never...this is the first. First time of my own will. I was always taken. Taken. Never gave. And I want to, want to give to Pavlik. I fall on the pillow, offer my body, spread-eagled, faceup. *Take me, I want to say, please. Tell me you want me, tell me—*

Pavlik straightens. A strange noise escapes him. "Yeek." He gawks at me, my thighs, then my face.

My heart hammers, every nerve is on fire. I gather the sheets into fists, willing myself not to groan. Why isn't he jumping me?

He's transfixed. "What's this...what are you doing?"

I want you to have me. Take me. I think. I love you.

He fumbles for the switch, turns off the lamp, then carefully covers me with his blanket, all the way to my chin.

I throw it off, bewildered. *Why don't you take me? You don't want me? Am I too fat? Too ugly? Too dumb? Are you afraid to hurt the baby? Do bruises disgust you? What?*

Pavlik gives me a wan smile, sits on the edge of the bed. Old springs whine. He touches my face, gingerly, like I'd break in his hold. "You're beautiful, you know that?" He says.

Are you shy? I think. *Wait...you're a virgin...are you?* I reach for the bulge in his briefs. It's limp.

Pavlik tenses, moves my hand away. "Please, don't. I'd prefer it...if you didn't touch it."

I breathe hard, confused.

"It's not that you're not lovely, you are. Really. It's just that...only Kostya was allowed to touch it." He looks down.

My ears ring. *What?* I think I heard it wrong. My feet get cold, then my stomach, then my heart. Everything within me stills. *Kostya? Did you say, Kostya?* It downs on me, chills me to the bone, makes me brittle. I will break. One touch, and I will break. *The macaw. The beautiful macaw. How could I be so blind?*

Pavlik is lost in the shadow, a silhouette, thickened smoke. "Irina." He says.

I see him and don't see him. He's one with the night, the darkness in the room. Black, like the wings of the black admiral. The butterfly.

"I'm..." He rubs his face, takes a deep breath. "I'm gay."

There is the ticking of the clock and this silence, empty loud silence that fills me with a void. I'm hollow, blank and hollow. Can't hold it, can't. Insufferable.

"Kostya and I, we were...together." He swallows, feverish now, whispering. "Listen, my parents don't know. Please don't tell them, it'll kill them. Promise me you won't."

I don't know how, my neck is so stiff, but I nod.

He leans on me then. Falls on me, like a cut stalk of grass. I wrap him in the blanket, hold his head in my lap until he cries it out and falls asleep. And I get numb, after hours of not moving, numb and torpid. Doze off. In and out of haze, in and out.

Cold morning. Cold early morning. Blue light in the room, dusty blue, like the ghost of the macaw. The cawing of crows. It startles me. I'm fuzzy.

The clock on the desk shows five after six.

Long shadows trace Pavlik's face. He snores lightly. I'm afraid to disturb him, to wake him up. It takes me a while to slide out from under him. My skin, in goosebumps. I stand on the rug, barefoot, balance on one leg. Step into panties. Dress.

It's too close, too familiar. I just can't. Yes, I can. I hug myself, tiptoe, hover over him. Watch him. He'll never be mine. All this talking, listening, his interest and politeness and yesterday...his intercession, and I thought. I was wrong. Nothing more than a veneer, social polish. Gratitude. He's just...it doesn't fit in my head. And yet it makes sense.

All of it, finally makes sense.

Kostya's distaste. The peasant girl. The girl, me. Yuck. Yucky. All the girly things. Of course. The time they spent together, the hours, rehearsing.

I grab my notepad, write, shake Pavlik awake.

"Lemme alone." He mumbles.

I shake him harder.

"Please, I'm trying to sleep." He hides under the blanket, turns away.

I persist until he sits up, rubbing his face. "What? What time is it?"

I give him pad. "Why did you tell them it was your baby?"

"Oh, this." He squints at my words, sighs. "Well...you see. It's very simple. You saved my life, I wanted to return the favor." He sounds pragmatic, like his father, and it's fake. I can tell it's fake, by the tone of his voice.

I slap the page. I want to slap him, squish him, the butterfly turned pest. "Liar." I write. "That's not the real reason."

He deflates. "Yeah, you're right, it's not. Can't hide anything from you, can I?" He looks beaten. "What do you want me to say?"

A crow cries, another answers, like they're calling each other.

I wait, immobile.

"Okay, I guess I owe you the truth." He glances at the door. "Papa...suspects me, suspected for some time now, and, well, it was the perfect opportunity to prove him wrong, you know. He never really liked Kostya. All this time we spent together...and he hates makeup, hates it that I sue, doesn't think it's *manly*. He used to drill me on not having a girlfriend. It's gotten to the point where I started avoiding him, and then, you showed up. So...he got off my back, and, well, your pregnancy...I thought it'd secure his belief—"

I throw the pad at the wall. Smack. It slides down in a heap of rustling pages. *Here you go, Irina Myshko, I think. Used again. What is wrong with you? You just don't learn, do you?*

"Please, Irina, don't be mad. I'm sorry. I really *am*. I should've asked you first, I know. I'm such an idiot." He walks over to me. To what? To hold me, to console me? Yesterday it

would've sent my heart aflutter. Now it pains me. I edge away.
I'm just a tool for you, to solve your petty problems. No worries, I'm used to it. Have been a tool all my life. Pique fills me, bitter, biting. I pick up the notepad from the floor and write. "Why?"

"Why what?" His face is white, scared.

"Why did you ask for my story?"

"Oh. I don't know. Something about you...I guess I just wanted to help." He suddenly smiles. "You got me, though, at first. I was like, what? A catfish? What catfish? It took me a moment."

I want to claw it off his face, this smile.

He's noticed. His expression becomes serious. "No one has listened to you before, have they?"

I hold it, hold it really hard, to keep myself together.

"In a way you made it easier for me to share." He pauses. "Eels. They really did look like eels, they—"

I scribble, fast, shove it under his face. "So you don't love me." It's not a question, it's a statement.

He's startled. "No. No-no. Of course I do. I do love you. Just not in a sense of how a man loves a woman. You're like a friend, a very dear friend, like a...sister." He waits a second. "Do you love me?"

I turn away.

You're all the same, I think, gay, straight, doesn't matter. I thought I found the one. The perfect one. No such thing, but fuck, it hurts, it goddamn hurts!

"What if I don't want you to be the father of my baby?" I write. It's hard. The hardest words I wrote.

He goggles. "You don't? But I thought...I assumed..."

You assumed? My breath rattles. I'm nothing but a victim, a failure, am I? A lab mouse to practice on your pity and compassion! I want to scream. Mute. Mute. Seize the doorknob.

"Don't go."

I face him. Maybe it's for the best they found out, maybe it's not my place to be here, in this shiny cage. Maybe I should go home, where I belong, in a shithole.

I shake off his hand, yank open the door, crash through the parlor past sleeping Yulia and Anton, step into hand-me-down boots, throw on the coat and bustle out, down the stairs, into the fresh crunching snow.

Frost slaps my face. Must be close to minus twenty Celsius.

A dark mass, in front of me, on the sidewalk. Shifting, squirming. A pack of crows nibble on a dead cat, frozen stiff, eyes gone, belly open. I stomp. They scatter, cawing madly. I hasten to the parking lot. Steam escapes my nostrils, my nose hairs stick together on inhale, ears ache from cold. I forgot the hat. No matter, I don't care. I want to get away. Away from

this stuffy hole, to breathe, to think, to decide what to do next.

The crows screech their displeasure, hop after me, goading. One of them, the biggest and the blackest, swoops so close to my face, I feel the slipstream of its wings, hear the swish of its feathers. It circles, dives and goes for another pass, right over my head. A couple centimeters more and it would've scratched me. I shoo it away. It cries, lands on a bough of the elm, two beady on me, unblinking. My skin crawls.

It's not a crow, I think, it's a raven. They all are.

Their feathers are too glossy for a crow, bills too curved. And they don't caw, they croak, hoarse and low. Over the cat again, digging, ripping out strips of meat.

Could it be? I think. *No, I'm just paranoid.* And yet. That similar thrum in the air, that noise, that...

I glance up with a wild heart.

A snowblower, blue-and-orange, crawls along the boulevard, spumes up slush. The ground shudders and hums. I draw air. *It's nothing, I think, nothing.* And I know I'm wrong. Deep in my gut, I know.

Something is coming.

Morning spills over the rooftops. I want to ignore, to forget. Make tracks in the new snow, step at right angles, press one foot in the nook of another, in a pattern, like from a tire

of a gigantic truck. I finish at the other end of the parking lot. Kneel. Look at it, at the snow, at how peaceful it is, soft, smooth and white. *Why can't my life be like this?* I think. *Why does it always have to turn upside down just when I think I got lucky?*

Crunching footfalls.

I start, leap between a Zhiguli and a Moskvich, peek out.

About ten guys in black coats and caps pour out of Pavlik's entranceway, slap each other's backs, gaggle. Like ravens, black ravens. I frown. I've never seen them before, they don't live here, I'm certain. What were they doing here, so early in the morning?

The entrance door opens again. The fat old woman with the spaniel labors out. I wait until they're out of sight, cross the road and run in, shiver, stomp off the snow. My ears and fingers burn. Voices echo in the stairway. A mother and a little girl bundled up to her nose pass me. Not a word, no a glance. Somewhere above a door bangs shut. I rub my hands, gaze around. Nothing unusual, only...an uneasy feeling, like it wasn't a coincidence. And that hum, that buzz is back...it's nagging at me, nettling.

Pavlik. Something about Pavlik.

I have to warn him.

I hurry up the stairs, fit the key into the keyhole on the
third try and creep in.

Chapter 13. Donkeys

I peel off the coat. Smell oatmeal, hear noises. Scraping spoons, boiling kettle, morning news. *Great, I've woken them up. Fat chance of talking to him now.* I kick off the boots, glance in the mirror, smooth my bangs, steady my breath and walk in the parlor. Bed folded into sofa. Pavlik's door closed. I enter the kitchen. The clock shows a quarter to eight. An austere newscaster rattles on the screen, and below it, in the circle of light, Yulia and Anton hunch over the table. The viper and the owl. Eating.

What? He fell back asleep like nothing happened? I flounder, uncertain. If he doesn't care, should I? No, that can't be right. He's just hiding from them, ignoring them...is he? I stand like I'm nailed to the floor, in the bubble of tension, deliberately unnoticed after yesterday's drama.

Anton reads the paper, a porridge bowl and a cup of coffee in front of him. He peers at me over his glasses and goes back to reading without a word. Yulia bites into a buttered roll, scans a trashy magazine. Like I'm not there, like I don't exist. She chews, swallows, sips from her cup. "We're going to a gynecologist, you and I." Eyes on the magazine, voice acid. "Not

sure when yet, but soon." She smiles, looks up. Green, green with poison.

I harden. *Gynecologist? What for? To confirm that Pavlik is the father?* The thought chills me. Why? Didn't I want to leave for home an hour ago? Shouldn't it be beyond my worries now?

"And I'd appreciate it," adds Yulia, "if in the future you didn't slam a door at six in the morning. It's unacceptable in our house." In our house. She makes an emphasis on our house. "Go. Get ready, please. Simeon Ignatievich is picking up both of you," she glances at the clock, "any minute now."

Sim? I think. It must've shown on my face.

"He wants to celebrate the beginning of a new family, Irina. You remember Simeon Ignatievich, right?"

How does he know?

"Now," she leans toward me, "do me a favor. Please, don't do anything stupid. Smile, nod, stay quiet, like you always do. It's very important for Pavlusha's career."

Like I always do, I think. Irina Myshko, mute dura, always accepting, always agreeable. Sure.

Anton sets his cup on the saucer with a clink. His spherical eyes latch on me. "Please." He says. "We're both asking you. Nothing stupid."

Ten minutes later we're dressed and making our way downstairs. Pavlik's face is grim and frightened. He's silent. I

want to ask if this was arranged behind his back, if he knew,
 if...that sense again. A trace of a feeling. Present, maddening.
 We're out the door, and the snow on the curb. That spot.
 Nothing. There is nothing.

Terror strikes me.

The dead cat is gone. Did someone move it? Did the ravens
 drag it off? Worse. Was it ever there to begin with? Hackles
 rise on my neck. I sense eyes, many eyes on my back. Sharp,
 astute, searching. I spin and I know before looking up. There
 they are, on the roof, on the edge of the cornice. Ravens. Close
 to a hundred. Their wings touch, their feathers ruffle on the
 breeze. They don't croak, don't shift, just stare. Stare at me.
 They plan something, some mischief.

We're watching you, they seem to say.

My heart leaps to my throat, and it's dry there, awfully
 dry. I look away, watch pedestrians mill about. They're all
 dressed in fur, winter fur. Fur coats, fur hats. Brown, fake,
 matted, inverted. Minks, colonies of minks swarm the street,
 from every corner they come out, from every entranceway, rabid,
 hungry. They sniff the air, cock their heads, study me, like I'm
 food, a rodent to be eaten. They creep toward be, ten meters,
 five, so close. And they crouch, they tense and-

Pavlik touches my hand.

I flinch.

No minks, no ravens, no cat. Empty street. And snow, crunching snow. Mercedes, glossy golden, rolls into the parking lot, stops. Out staggers a figure. Big. Fat. The coat, the scarf, I know it's Sim. "Good morning, children!" He barks.

"Morning!" Says Pavlik. Jaunty, strained.

I wave.

We cross the street and walk into his arms. It's a hold of authority, what he gives us, of superior animal. His perfume all around me, salty, that smell of sea and silt. "Congratulations! Exciting news!" He lets go, forcefully, as if he wants to push us apart. And his face, not festive at all, resentful, rough. Ambivalent. "Children, children. So young." Shakes head. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Pavlik opens his mouth, not a word. Something strange twists his face, something...shame? No, not exactly. Guilt?

"What is it? You're sick? Lost your voice?" This is cutting, Sim's words are cutting.

"Oh, it's nothing, Sim. Sorry." Pavlik forces a smile. "Still waking up, I guess."

Liar. I think.

Sim studies him. "Are you? Well, this'll wake you up. Get in." And he slaps his ass, and...kneads it. With that familiarity that doesn't leave space for doubt. Like he's done it before, like it...belongs to him. Pavlik shrinks. I stare.

Sim intercepts my gaze. "Well? Get in, Irina. We're going to the House of Actors."

I open the door, sink into leather. It's warm, smells of smoke and that same perfume. It reminds me of Kostya's car. Pavlik's lips in my ear now. "Listen. It's not what you think...it's just..."

I stare at my hands, pretend not to hear.

Absent.

Feel, feel movement. We leave the boulevard, nose into traffic, crawl toward Moscow center. I scan the buildings, the sky. Clear and blue. No crows, no vultures, only pigeons scattered on the sidewalks, still, ruffled, frozen.

Red light. We roll to a stop.

Sim turns around, regards us. Pavlik, me, Pavlik again. "What were you thinking with, head or cock?" His voice is quiet, accusing. The mask is gone. It's in the open now.

The light turns green. A honk behind us, long and angry.

Sim erupts. "Shut up!"

"Sim, please." Pavlik, pleading.

I feel his pain and submission, and I hate it. I want to get out and run, and stumble and fall and bury my flaming face in the snow, and forget, and—

Sim jerks the car forward. "Silence! Did I give you permission to talk? Oh, this is beyond me. Be-yond me!"

Pavlik finds my hand. I clutch it.

"A baby." Sim snorts. "You're a child. She's a child. What were you *thinking*?"

And I try not to see, but I do, it's so clear, it's between them...it's...my stomach is hurting.

We turn into an alley. Peeling mansions, bleak cafes, a hair salon, a curtain store. Shouts ring ahead. Roaring, braying. Loud. Then I see them. A straggling rally led by a jackass with huge ears, black beret, black military uniform, a megaphone to his mouth. A mob of men in his wake, shaved heads, dumb pink faces. Yokels. Some hold red flags, white swastika in the middle, circled. I've seen it before.

Donkeys, I think. *Fucking Nazi donkeys*.

"What's this now?" Sim says, breaking.

They swoop the car, slap on the hood, on the sides. A gangly kid lowers his face at Pavlik, grins and spits. Saliva slips down the glass, leaves a slimy streak. He shouts something to his mates, points. Pavlik recoils. One of the hicks sits astride the flagpole and rides it like a dick, braying pleasure. A couple more crowd the driver's window, holler something obscene at Sim, a stream of invective, flip him the bird. Their calls become a chant. I discern it now.

"Homos out of Russia! Homos out of Russia!"

Hands on the right of the car, five pairs, pushing it, shaking it. There are curses, laughter. It's done half-ass, not so much to cause any harm, more for a scare, for show.

Sim's face drains color. His grips the wheel, doesn't move.

"Sim!" Cries Pavlik. "They'll break the car! They'll--"

"To hell with the car." Says Sim, sharp. "Let them. I feel sorry for them. They're black with hate. Animals. Look at them."

Then, a shrill whistle. Militia.

They scatter. Only handprints left on the glass, handprints and smears. The alley is empty, no cars, no people. Sim pulls up to the curb, parks between a Lada and a BMW, exits.

Pavlik holds the door for me.

It takes me a minute. Pins and needles prick my legs. I look up and I see them. Past seven stories, past a stone knight on a cornice. I meet their avian stare. A throng of ravens perch on the lip of the roof.

Just you try, I think. I'll find a way to break your necks. You don't believe me?

They screech and take off.

Sim urges us along, through oak doors, to the sixth floor, where famous actors and poets and theatergoers like to mingle. Eat, drink, philosophize. Throw around pompous words, ideas, engage in empty polemic. I want to puke. Puke. Pay no attention to décor or the ambiance, go through the pantomime. I need to

pee, now. Flee to the restroom at the end of the hallway, a long closet with three stalls. Turn on cold water, breathe, stare in the mirror. Me. That's me. Wild reddish eyes, circles underneath, and this. The thoughts. They drill through my head.

Pavlik, gay. I scoop a handful of water, splash my face.

Sim, gay. Splash.

Pavlik, Kostya, affair. Splash, splash.

Sim, Pavlik, coercion. Splashing is not enough.

I dip my face under the faucet, let the stream run over it, wait until my hands stop shaking, until I can draw one long uninterrupted breath.

What did you think? In my head. *How did you think it works?* *You thought there are those who have it differently, did you?* *Naïve dura.*

I want to punch the sink, the mirror, the wall. The urge is so strong, that I almost do it. Almost. Heave. Lift the sweater, twist my skin. Slap, punch. Bruises, more bruises. Then I lean over the sink and cry for a long time. Those faces, the donkeys. The hate in their eyes, the rage, the madness. I blow my nose, wipe my face, pass compressed air. In, out. In, out.

Women give me strange looks. Women who come in to take a piss. Older women, painted, polished, jeweled. I wait for an empty stall, squat, do my business, and get out.

Lost in three dinner halls, I meander. Finally spot Sim and Pavlik at a table in the corner, by a piano. They don't see me, bent over, deep in a heated argument, voices harsh, faces florid. Reddish. From the glow of the red wallpaper and the ruby velvet chairs. Classic theater aura. Ten round tables, walls hung with actor portraits. No other customers except a well-dressed middle-aged couple by the window.

I make my way over, sit.

They abruptly fall silent.

Pavlik's eyes are puffy, like he was crying.

"Irina! You're alive!" Boasts Sim. He's so good at this, so good. "We thought you eloped with the chef and left us." Malice in his tone, as if he wants it to happen, wants me out of here. Out of Pavlik's life. He thrusts the menu in my hands. "Go on. We already ordered."

My stomach betrays me. I'm hungry. Every dish name draws saliva. Then I read, WILD BOAR BRISKET. My finger stops on it.

Eaglet? How long has it been since we spoke?

No answer.

Eaglet, please.

Same silence, and maybe...breathing.

Listen, I'm sorry—

You promised, says the eaglet, you forgot.

Eaglet, you're there! I thought maybe you left me.

Four more months. Says the eaglet.

Four...what?

Before I leave.

Oh. Yes. Four more months. A chill passes through me. But what is it that I forgot?

You promised me a whole boar. I only got a taste of its balls. And now you want to feed me some pig's brisket.

Yes, you're right. I think. I'm sorry. I was going to—

No, you weren't. You got comfortable, lazy, and you forgot.

They gut, these words. I have nothing to retort with. My ears burn from shame. I flaked out.

Food arrives. I bite into the brisket, wolf it down, belch. Pavlik smirks, his first smile since morning. I notice he's been drinking. Both of them. Sim downs vodka, shot after shot. Suddenly he leans over and says to me hotly, "Pavlik's got a gorgeous cock, doesn't he?"

Pavlik chokes on his food. "Sim!"

My mouth drops open. You're jealous! Hurt and jealous, drinking yourself stupid, like an upset little boy.

"Answer. Do you love him? Do you truly love him?"

Pavlik looks at me strange.

I take a moment, nod.

"You do, do you? Or is it his cock...his cock that you love?" Sim's eyes are unfocused, sweat on his forehead.

"Sim." Pavlik implores. "You said you wouldn't—"

"Waiter!" Sim bellows.

"Please, no more." Pavlik's hand on his arm. Sim picks it up and kisses it. Wet, loud. Pavlik jerks back, startled. "Not here. There are people..."

Sim is beyond caring. He's pissed, pissed good. "To future parents." Raises the glass, unaware that it's empty. A pimply waiter appears with a bottle of Stolichnaya. Sim snatches it out of his hands, careens. The chair groans. He sticks out a foot to catch himself. "Mysh-ko!" He cries, slurry. "What kind of a name is that? Bad for the stage, bad...go on, get married, you'll be Baboch. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Pavel and Irina Baboch! Why, I ought to write a play just for the two of you." He roars at his own joke.

Pavlik says, "Help me."

We heave Sim by the armpits, help him stand, pay, lead him down and out into December sun. Cold, indifferent. Dirty slush on the ground, mixed by hundreds of feet. And on Sim's car something dark, on the hood...a steamy lump...the stink, the sight...I gag.

"It's shit!" Cries Pavlik. "Some asshole. Right on the car!"

Sim sees it and howls. "Scum! Low...cowardly...scum!"

Passersby shrink back, give us odd looks.

I kneel, Pavlik joins me. We scoop handfuls of snow from the curb, dump it on the turd, cover it, pat around, and fling it from the hood. It leaves a hideous smear. We wipe the hood with snow until every trace is gone. Until it's squeaky clean.

My hands are red, throbbing.

"Thank you, children." Sim fumbles with keys. "I feel sick. I need to go home and lie down."

Pavlik nudges me. "Coming?"

I barely have time to climb in. The Mercedes tears into the street, swerving. I close my eyes, grip the door handle. Is it better to be torn apart by an eagle or to crash in a car?

I don't know which.

I don't know.

Chapter 14. Seal

The car stops. I open my eyes. Tverskaya. A rich neoclassical building. Granite base stuffed with boutiques. Above, five marble stories with tall narrow windows. The street is filled with cars and people, their constant noise. And dusk. Last sunrays gild the steeples of Historical Museum. Lights come on, and the tree, the enormous New Year tree by Red Square entrance flares up. A five-point star on top of it and bright twinkling garlands around.

Soon it'll be New Year, I think, stepping out of the car. I'm almost seventeen and still I haven't seen Kremlin New Year Tree show, the only one where Uncle Frost is not drunk out of his fucking mind. For fear of sacking. Animal. All of them, animals. Beasts in need of Lenins and Stalins to be curbed. And I'm no different. I glorify my victimhood, for what? To justify my hate. I hate everyone and everything. Fuck you, you hear me? Fuck you!

Let the animal out, says the eaglet.

I flinch.

Something is wrong. Something...the silence. Loud ringing silence. The din is gone. Cars, people stand still, frozen.

Terror locks my throat.

They're here, they heard me. Beasts. Woodpeckers, roosters, tapeworms, maggots. They fill the street, boil over edges of every crevice, every hole, advance at me. Turtles, moles, geese. Horseflies, clouds of horseflies, buzzing, shifting. Above them, circling vultures. And ravens. A black army, a bird on every outcrop, on every post. *Let the animal out*, they screech. *Who are you? We want to see.*

The ground shakes. There is a horrible crumbling noise, like giant breaking bones. I spin around. Historical Museum collapses in a pile of bricks. Out rides a tank, Lenin on top, one arm outstretched, another in his trouser pocket. It thunders along Tverskaya, followed by the beasts.

It's not a statue, I realize with horror, *it's his body, his embalmed body from the Mausoleum.*

"What animal are you, citizen Myshko?" He shouts, sunken eyeballs two stones, lips bloodless, skin yellow cellophane stretched over skull. "Well? Answer!"

I feel faint, dizzy. *I'm a mouse*, I think. *Am I? I don't know anymore.* My knees buckle. Pavlik catches me, leads me. Archway, entrance, lobby, an ascending-room elevator behind metal-grate doors, old style, restored to luxury. Well-lit carpeted corridor. Sim's apartment, opulent and expensive. A sound, music comes from everywhere. Something classical. Bells,

trumpets, piano. Hallway is hung with heavy golden frames.
Paintings, mirrors, placards. Posh rug on polished parquet.

Let the animal out, I think. Let the animal out.

Sim throws his coat on the floor, keys on the glass table
littered with magazines, kicks off shoes and vanishes in a
doorway. "Coffee?" I hear running water, jangling silvery,
clinking cups.

"Where are you?" Pavlik asks me.

I blink. *You don't want to know.*

"Jacket?" He helps me out of it, picks up Sim's coat, hangs
them in a mirrored wardrobe. His movements are swift, habitual.

"You're so pale. Come on." He takes my hand, pulls me into
the kitchen. It sparkles. Chrome, tile. View of busy Tverskaya,
windowsills wide enough to sit on. Bottles of liquor, packets of
food on every surface, some torn open, some still sealed.
Baguettes, ham, cheese, smoked fish, jars of wild mushrooms and
jam and pickled cabbage. My stomach rumbles. I'm hungry, again.
And I need to pee, again.

Sim hums to music, miraculously sober and steady, works
some kind of a brewing machine. The smell of fresh coffee fills
the kitchen. "Why the long faces? Smile, children, *al-ways*
smile." He puts three steaming cups on the table.

"Smile?" Smirks Pavlik. "Sim, they shat on your car!"

"Yes!" He smacks the table. Coffee spills. "They shat on me my whole life! Every step of the way. Do you think it ever stopped me?" He stoops, flings his arms around us. I smell vodka on his breath. "I want you to listen...listen inside you. What do you hear?"

"Music." Says Pavlik flatly.

"That's right. And what creates that music?"

Pavlik glances at me. I raise my brows.

"Haven't I taught you anything?" Sim throws up his arms.

"Love. Love is what creates it. They have no music, those asses. None. They envy us. It mustn't stop you from making your art. Never, understand? *Ne-ver!*"

"Yes, Sim, I understand." This, subdued.

The genius director and his pet actor, I think with aversion. The seal and the butterfly. He'll squish you and you won't even notice.

"What if it escalates?" Asks Pavlik quietly. "What if it's shit today, guns tomorrow?"

"You think I haven't been under a gun?" Sim inflates and I'm afraid he'll burst. "Why, you're mistaken, my child. I have been, and worse. But we'll talk about it some other time. Right now I want to talk about Irina's pregnancy and your future. Your *joint* future."

I can't hold it anymore. The eaglet is getting heavy, always pressing on my bladder, always...I rush out, jog along the corridor, stumble in.

Wrong room.

Sim's office? Large window, rows and rows of bookcases, a writing desk with a heap of papers, a monitor and a keyboard. A glass ashtray packed with cigarette stubs. A fancy leather sofa. Shoes and scarves scattered around in creative mayhem. I suppress my urge, stand still, listen to mechanical ticking.

I want to look out the window, to see if the beasts are still there or if—

You know where you're headed, don't you? I think. Once they find out. They'll stick you into that mental clinic where they stick your mama. Every fall and every spring. They'll feed you drugs for weeks, then send you home. To your dear Lyosha Kabansky, the boar with the sinewy dick that he'll shove up your—

Stop! I hyperventilate, totter out, barge in the next door. Bathroom. Squat, pee. Wash my face. Feel a bit better. Steal into the kitchen and halt in the door.

Pavlik leans over the counter, Sim is behind him. Pressed into him, spooning. His hand, stubby fingers encrusted with rings, is on Pavlik's ass. Kneading. Pushing, sliding in and out between his thighs. Pavlik's eyes are closed, face tense, like

he's tolerating it. Sim rubs against him with little grunts, whispers something in his ear, the coffee cup forgotten on the windowsill.

I release a shuddering exhale. Pavlik jerks to look. Sim follows his gaze and grins. "Irina! What's the matter?"

I turn and storm out. Bathroom. Run in, slide the latch in place. *You won't, you won't, you won't! What did you expect?* But I can't keep them back. The tears. Bitter disappointment. Broken love. Big splats on the shiny ceramic floor. *Pavlik...why? Pavlik. Kostya was love, but this...this is...Sim is...just like Lyosha. Just like that pissant Lyosha!* I ram a fist into the sink. It hurts. I cry out, lift my sweater, grab a handful of skin and twist.

A knock on the door. "Irina?" Pavlik. He rattles the knob. "Open, please." He waits. "Please, I beg you."

I'll never let anyone in, ever again, never! I want to scream this. *Leave me alone!* I hit the door, pound it, so my knuckles hurt. Kick it. *Go away! I hate you! I hate everyone! I hate you people, you hurt each other for no reason! You're worse than animals, worse!*

Pavlik says something. I don't hear him. Slide to the floor, no longer myself.

The mouse.

Its paws slip on the wet floor. It falls on its belly, squeaks. Something hammers the door, something large. The latch groans and gives, dust sprays in a chalky cloud. The door bangs open. A seal tumbles next to the mouse, the butterfly flutters after it. Jittery, erratic.

The mouse trembles, angry, backed into a corner. The seal picks it up with a front flipper. The mouse peeps in protest, bites it. The seal roars, throws it off. The mouse rolls to the wall, crumpled. The butterfly flits about, useless, helpless. The seal swipes the mouse up, lifts it to an impossible height. The mouse knows, if it jumps, it'll die. It can't fly, it doesn't have wings.

It submits.

The seal crawls through a hole, an underpass leading out, into the raging winter, dark night and white snow flurries. The mouse shivers from cold. The butterfly clings to it, sluggish. They glide on ice, joined by other beasts. The mouse yawns, lulled by movement. Dozes. Rolls off the seal's flipper onto something soft, and dreams. Dreams of ravens. They surround the butterfly, peck at it, stab it—

"Irina?" Pavlik's voice.

The mouse is gone.

The girl.

I rise to the surface, plunge back.

"Wake up." He says, shakes me.

I fight through slumber. *What?*

"We're home. Come on."

I blink. Pavlik's face, pale in the shadow. "Feeling better?" He looks concerned. "You passed out in the bathroom. We had to break-open the door..."

I rub my face. I'm in the back of Sim's Mercedes. He looks at me through the rear view mirror. "Awake? Good." Turns, leans between seats. "I have something important to tell you." He peers at me. "You know what it is."

I swallow, hard.

"This pregnancy of yours..."

"What about it?" Says Pavlik quickly.

"Don't interrupt me. Irina, I've known Pavlik for over five years, and I get what you're trying to do."

"Hold on..." Pavlik stammers. "I don't understand—"

"You don't need to understand. You need to listen. *Listen!*" Sim's eyes glitter with annoyance. "Irina, this boy here can't lift his precious cock unless another one is up his tight little butt hole. He's as gay as they get."

"Sim!" Pavlik glares. "Stop it!"

"Shhh. Calm down. You do each other a favor." His scarf slips, he flips it up. "I assume, whoever the father is, he either doesn't know or doesn't care, correct?"

I nod, defeated.

"Thought so. Here is what you do. You two get married."

"Married?" Pavlik's voice breaks.

Married? I think, my heart wild.

"Why are you so surprised? Nothing unusual about two young people getting married, is there? *No-thing!* Get married, have a baby, people will think it's yours, Pavlik. It'll protect you, until you grow a thick enough skin to deal with that scum. Understand?"

Pavlik sits silent. I can't move, can't take a breath. Someone yells on the street. Soft flops of snow start falling, hushing noises.

"Do you understand?" Sim repeats.

"Yes." Says Pavlik at last.

"Good. Now get out. I'm tired." He grumbles, withdraws.

"Thanks for the lift." Throws Pavlik, pulls on my hand.

We flee the car, trot through the patter of snow, into the warmth of the entranceway. I step in and feel it. Immediately. The threat. An avian hubbub. And the smell of rot, sweet, nauseating. *Ravens*, I think, seize Pavlik's arm.

"What is it?" He asks.

Ravens, I mouth. Grunt, frustrated. *Ravens...and a jackal.* I think. It smells like a jackal. *Shakalov.*

"We're almost home, you can..." He says, then. "Oh, this is just great. Look. Some asshole broke our mailbox."

They hang on the wall, four boxes with five slots each, painted sickly green, stenciled-on with apartment numbers, some bent, dented, others charred. The one with the number eighteen yawns open, its retrieving door ripped off clean.

"Mama will be hysterical." Pavlik takes out the newspaper, unfolds it, walks up the stairs. A piece of paper floats out. He doesn't notice. I pick it up, a lined page from a school notebook scrawled with large childish letters.

PAVEL BABOCH, KOSTYA PROBABLY FORGOT TO TELL YOU BECAUSE HIS FAGGOT FACE GOT SCRAGGED. YOU'RE NEXT, JEWISH HOMO. HAPPY COMING NEW YEAR, HAPPY NEW EXPERIENCES.

My insides freeze.

"Irina?" Pavlik calls, returns. I look up, mortified. *I saw them. I want to say. I saw them leave, the ravens!*

"Can I see?" He reaches for the paper, reads it. His face falls, drains color. I snatch it out of his hands, furious, crunch it into a ball and fling it up the staircase. It lands by the garbage chute. *Fucking bastards!* I scream in my head. *Retarded degenerates! I hope you drown in dogpiss, you rotten chickenshits, you—*

"Hey!" Pavlik cries. "What did you do that for?"

I'm deaf from rage, shaking.

"Pavlusha?" Yulia's voice, from above. "Pavlusha, is that you?" Slippers shuffle down. She halts by the chute, empty trash pail in her hand. "I was taking out the garbage and I thought I heard your voice..."

From the fifth floor. Really? I think.

She intercepts my gaze, spots the note, picks it up.

"Mama, no!" Pavlik rushes up the stairs.

"What's this?" Her voice is high-pitched.

Great. I cover my face. From highs of rage to lows of shame, it hurts. It hurts.

"What does this mean?" Her voice shakes.

"Mama, please, I'll explain..."

"Yulechka?" Anton now, echoey. "What's going on? You all right? I'm coming down."

I steep in guilt. Hear them whisper, hear them mount the stairs, trail behind them. The rattle of keys, the rustling of feet. As soon as the door is locked, Yulia explodes. "Read it!" She shoves the paper into Anton's hands. "Here, read it!"

STARTED HERE.

"Mama, please, can we do without hysterics? It's just a joke, someone played a prank on me, that's all." Pavlik smiles, but his eyes dance with mortal terror.

"Hysterics?" Yulia works her mouth. "Did you say, *hysterics?*"

"A death threat." Says Anton slowly. "*Jewish homo?*"

Pavlik's face goes ashen.

I have to act, to fix this somehow, to...what? I don't know. Something. Can't just stand here, can't...I rush into the parlor, to the balcony, there, under the stool, the notepad, the pen. Scribble.

IT'S SHAKALOV. HE'S GOT A PORTRAIT IN HIS OFFICE. ONE OF RUSSIAN NATIONAL UNITY LEADERS. HE THINKS ALL SIM'S ACTORS ARE GAY. HE HATES GAYS. HE'S SICK.

Run back. Give it to Anton.

"Is this a joke?" He asks quietly.

Yulia peers over his shoulder. "A jackal...?"

"Can we talk about this tomorrow?" Pavlik's eyes are wide. He stares at me...I don't understand what's wrong, I don't... "Irina is tired, I'm tired. My leg is acting up..." His eyes wouldn't leave me, he motions me, like he wants to—

What? I think. It makes perfect sense! It's him! Who else—

Anton hands me back my notepad. His face is grim.

I take it, read it.

IT'S THE JACKAL. IT'S GOT A HEAD IN ITS LAIR. ONE OF RAVENS. THE JACKAL THINKS ALL SEAL'S PUPS ARE PARROTS. IT HATES PARROTS. IT'S SICK.

I drop the notepad.

All goes black.

Chapter 15. Fox

The mouse hides in the girl. The girl hides in the mouse. For three weeks. They interchange with alarming rapidity. Surface, plunge, rise again, sink deeper. To be pulled out. To be picked on by the viper and the owl, defended by the butterfly. Distant seal barks, far away, remote, the whining of the jackal. Or maybe it's only a trick? The ravens. The trick of the ravens. And something new. Some...new animal. Dry, old, sly. The mouse smells its stink. And the girl, at noon. On December thirty-first.

New Year.

Nine-story Brezhnevka.

I stand on the seventh floor landing, with the whole ménage. We watch a brown door, vinyl, plastic number 62 over a spy-hole. Yulia, in her leather coat, snakeskin, finger on the bell. She rings it for the third time. It ding-dongs with an echo. Anton coughs, champagne, mandarins pressed to his chest. Pavlik sets heavy plastic bags on the floor. Jars in them. Olivier salad, herring under fur coat, pickled mushrooms, caviar.

I grip a carton box. Bird's milk cake, my favorite. Can hardly breathe. The coat, too warm, and a premonition. A sense of doom, of an invisible...I grope for it, to understand it better...texture. The texture of the space, in my mind. It changes. Rough and ugly. I reach out, touch it.

Murder, I think. There will be murder.

The elevator whines. Its wheels and cogs revolve with a kind of a vespine whirr.

In the flat across the landing, I think.

I hear it. That hum. I'd recognize it anywhere. Horseflies. My heart thrums. Horseflies! Pissing themselves rotten. Bottle of bootleg, gut-rot vodka. Hairy chests, abdomens, rubbing legs. I shudder from disgust, from pain. I want to know more. I don't want to know.

Yulia rings the bell again.

The elevator stops on the floor below, opens. Heavy steps.

I glance at Pavlik. He politely ignores me. These past three weeks, every warning I have written, he has ignored. Nicely, graciously. I want to tell him how clear it is, what I see, how sharply traced with claws and bills and insect cutters. Everything I sense, everything I...*Fine*. I think. *Join them. Think I'm dumb. Or nuts. Or both.*

"She's probably in the bathroom." Says Yulia with a tight smile, holds the bell button down for ten seconds. Echoes die,

and the voice, irritated, brittle. "I'm coming! I'm coming! No need to ring through the whole house." The labored patter of feet, the sliding of locks, and there she stands, arms akimbo. Seventy-something, petite, rugose, gray hair hennaed flaming red, pulled into a bun. Sharp nose, sharp eyes.

A fox, I think. An old toothless fox.

"Mama, what took you so long?" Natters Yulia.

"We brought treats, Margarita Petrovna." Hoots Anton, raises the bottles and the packets to show for it. "Champagne, mandarins." Points to the bags. "Herring under fur coat, your favorite. Yulechka spent all day making it."

And I was just a fixture in the kitchen, I think. My mind whirrs. Comes back to horseflies. Horseflies. I want to shut down, to—

"Grandma! Happy coming New Year!" Says Pavlik.

She makes no reply, peers at me. "A bit too fat and too short, but what of it now. It's too late. I suppose it'll do." She turns to Pavlik. "At least she's got a bum. Something for you to hold on to."

He flushes.

"Mama—" Begins Yulia.

"Don't just stand there." She snaps. "You're letting in the cold air."

I grin. Something about her, sturdy harshness. Beaten about, unbroken. I like her. I like her for this, for this alone. The green from Yulia's face, it's gone. The poison, drained. "Well...we can't come in with you in the door, can we now?" Awkward, she sounds awkward.

Then I hear it again. The buzzing, one floor below. *A wasp.* I think. *A wasp is coming for a horsefly.* I kind of malignant glee fills me.

Pavlik nudges me to enter.

A one-room flat, an earthy russet hole thick with knick-knacks, clocks, blankets, shawls on backs of chairs, photographs in dusty frames. A woven rug on the creaky floor in the living room. An unfolded celebratory table. Check cloth, mixed crockery, glasses, what looks like a big plate of jellied pike.

Pavlik takes the box from me, tramps after his parents into the kitchen. Margarita helps me with the coat and leads me to the table. I sit on one of the five mismatched chairs, by the TV on a narrow console and a scraggly New Year tree decked out in ornaments and silver tinsel. Behind the lacy curtains glisten yellow windows of other Brezhnevkas, nightly Moscow to light up with fireworks at midnight.

Margarita studies my belly.

Do you know? I think. Or are you as blind as them?

"That's one strong baby." She says, puckers her lips, pats me. "Don't it dare destroy you...it's got a lot of might. I tell you. I can feel it."

I nod, uneasy.

"What made you stop talking? Shock would do that. Give me your hand." She studies my palm, a crooked nail on my lifeline.

A catfish walloped me in my own piss. I think, watch her. I suppose that's shock enough to make you stop talking.

"Mama, you didn't have to!" Exclaims Yulia.

I jump from surprise.

"I asked you not to cook. You never listen. You have to think about your health, at your age!" She deposits salad bowls between dishes on the table.

"Yulia, shut your trap."

I can hear her closing her mouth. I can actually hear it. My lips begin to stretch of their own accord.

"I'm fine." Grumbles Margarita. "I told you I'd cook. What's all this?" She points a shaky finger. "What did you bring this for? You think I can't afford to feed you on my own?" She stands, shorter than her daughter, grows taller. Yulia shrinks. "I'm not dead yet, so stop fussing around me. Fuss around your future daughter-in-law."

"Yes, mama." Siphons Yulia. "I'm only worried about your heart—"

"Leave my heart alone! My heart is fine. Better worry about your own."

Yulia doesn't say a word.

I positively glow.

"Margarita Petrovna, tea." Anton brings in an enameled kettle and teacups, Pavlik on his heels with napkins and cake.

"Well? Why are you standing? Who did I cook this for? Sit!" She winks at me. I hide a grin.

We sit to dinner.

Margarita insists on serving the food herself, moves about with surprising agility. Chats up Yulia and Anton about their jewelry store, Pavlik about his acting. Gives me a tattered notebook and a dull pencil, asks me. About my mama, about my... I can't. Can't write.

The hum.

In the flat across the landing. The wasp and the horseflies fight. The wasp raises its stinger. It drips venom. *Do it*, I think. *Do it!* The horseflies retreat. A door on the landing slams. Male voices, drunken, irate. Curses. The elevator.

I let out a breath, scrawl. "The wasp will kill the horsefly!" Elbow Pavlik.

"Just a second," he says, in the middle of recounting his recent performance to Margarita. She imbibes every word.

I want to get up, go look, desist, restless.

What if it's nothing? I moisten my lips. *What if I'm wrong?*

Anton turns on the TV. The screen throws a blue glare at the plates, the faces. Midnight is half an hour away. Then fireworks, presidential address.

I wonder how squiffed you'll be this time. I think. Proclaiming no shit is happening in the country, boasting patriotic pride like you give a fuck. Sure, let's pretend, let's watch The Little Blue Light, Russia's dumbest show. Let's envy rich pop stars, cosmonauts and heroes of social labor, hung with medals that are worth a pile of crap. Please, I want to puke.

I strain to listen. Quiet. It doesn't feel right...doesn't.

"—told you, it needs to be done proper." Margarita is saying. "Go see her mother and have a talk, for pity's sake."

Mother? I think. *What?*

"In January, Margarita Petrovna. Isn't that what we decided, Yulechka?" Says Anton pleasantly, downs a shot of vodka.

"Yes, that's right." Yulia says. "Right after—"

"Uh, hold on. Wait a second." Interrupts Pavlik. "How is it that I don't know about this?"

They squabble.

And I don't hear the rest, paralyzed. My pulse loud in my ears, my throat dry. Mother. January. I'm going back to...January. Back to...pictures in my mind. Cats, dogs, dirty

dishes, mounds of dirty dishes, filthy kitchen, Lenchka's leering mouth, Sonya, shamming, slippery, mama, disheveled, half-naked, drunk, grandma with her hideous laugh and...Lyosha. Greasy shirt, unbuttoned. Hairy chest, girdle, scruffy training pants.

Do I get to eat it when we visit?

Eaglet! I think. It moves inside me. I place a hand under my sweater. An elbow or a knee, something sharp, kicks me. I cry out, surprised. It hurts.

Do I? Asks the eaglet.

Yes, I think. Yes, I promised.

"Boy or girl?" Whispers Margarita. Her lips dry, rusty. "Gives you a hard time, little beastie, doesn't it?"

"Mama, we don't know yet. We're going to see my gynecologist, for an ultrasound." Says Yulia. "First week of January." She grills me with her green eyes. "She's one of the best in Moscow. Very sought after, very hard to get in."

I stiffen, imagining Yulia's face when—

"I'm coming with you." Says Pavlik, takes my hand under the table. I grab onto it.

"What for, Pavlusha?" Asks Yulia coyly.

"What do you mean, what *for*?" Pavlik scoffs. "It's *my* baby." He says it too eagerly, vaunting almost.

I begin to sweat.

"That's no business for men." Snaps Margarita. "Leave it to women, you already did your part." She titters.

"Mama!" Cries Yulia.

"What? Mama *what*? Don't you *mama* me. I say what I say. At my age I don't give a damn. You think he doesn't know how to make babies? Look at her. Think she ballooned from nothing?"

Red creeps up Yulia's cheeks.

"Yulechka, it's almost midnight." Interjects Anton.

"Is it?" Yulia blinks.

"Thirty seconds!" Anton uncorks champagne. The plug hits the ceiling, froth spumes on the table. He pours, stands.

We all stand, counting. Ten, nine, eight. On the TV screen, the black-and-gold clock of the Spasskaya Tower. Three. Two. One. The golden hand strikes twelve.

Chimes ring.

"Happy New Year! Happy new luck!"

We clink glasses. I drink. It's bubbly, sweet.

The puffy face of the president appears. Ruddy, raw, like that of a skinned bear. "Dear citizens of Russia—," he begins, and that's when it happens. All of it.

The fireworks start.

And the killing.

Chapter 16. Rat

I jump. It's there, in the three-room apartment. The wasp. It flexes, undulates, falls on the horsefly. The horsefly bucks beneath it, buzzes, frantic. Voices break through the drone, but I can't discern what's being said. I listen with avarice, greedy to hear more, to hear it die. The noise is constant, like a whine of an electric current. Then the first strike comes, with a stinger. No, with a knife. It cleaves the fly's abdomen, it—

"Hey, something wrong? Are you afraid of the fireworks? Come on." Pavlik pulls me to the window where Yulia and Anton already stand, lacy curtain parted, watching.

I scramble from his hold, whisk out of the room, into the hallway, fumble with unfamiliar locks. My head swims, hands shake, fingers are sweaty, slippery. *It's killing it, killing it*, pounds in my head. At last I manage to tear the door open.

Skidding footfalls echo down the stairs.

The wasp! It split! I think, run out onto the landing. It's biting cold here, after the warm apartment.

Then the screaming starts.

In the door across. A bony woman in a cheap dress. Gnarly face, rolling eyes, irises white, starkly white, with bright red

capillaries. Hands in her bleached hair, tearing. Her mouth open wide, she screams. Runs out of air, takes a shuddering gulp, screams again. Gulps, screams. Foams at the mouth. The sound pogoes up and down the staircase, one crazy protracted wail.

A rat, I think. High on some shit, I bet.

Walk up to her. She must be in her thirties, a low destitute junkie. I reach out. She suddenly stops, sags into my hold. I stagger under her weight, lose balance for a moment, lean on the wall. She wails into the hollow of my neck. Her face is wet, and the stink on her breath, mixed alcohol, garlic, cheap cigarettes. I gag.

"Roma." She wheezes. "There...Roma..."

Roma, I think. Grow hot with fury. Uncle fucking Roma.

"What is going on?" Pavlik's breath on my back.

"Pavlusha!" Yulia, worried. "Where did you go? Leave it!"

Doors open, feet sally out. Curious neighbors. Stinking nosy cockroaches with nothing else to do.

I study the place. Same layout, just like the flat I grew up in. Narrow corridor with peeling wallpaper, in places showing bare concrete. Sunken wardrobe, cardboard boxes against walls, soiled rags strewn about, pots, empty liquor bottles.

Calls on the landing, speculations.

"Excuse me, we heard you screaming. Something happened? Can we help somehow?" Says Pavlik.

The woman unglues from me, stares at him uncomprehendingly, her thin chest seesaws, breath raspy. "Roma..." Points to open living room double doors. "Roma there..." Grasps my shoulders, wails. "It's Sashka...Sashka bastard!" I want to get her off me, to go see with my own eyes. Ecstatic and terrified.

Anton wedges in. "Pavlusha, let's call the medics. They'll know what to do."

"You kidding, papa? You know how long it'll take them to get here? On New Year's? They're seeing boozy dreams by now."

"Papa speaks the truth, Pavlusha. Nothing we can do. Look at her. She's intoxicated." Says Yulia, squirming in. "Besides, it's none of our business."

Pavlik ogles her. "Really?"

"Let me in. Let me in!" Margarita elbows her way through.

"I'll kill you." Says the woman suddenly. Her eyes clear, she lets go of me, straightens. "I'll kill you Sashka, I swear." She lets go of me, bowls over Pavlik, pushes people aside and skips down the stairs. Falls, cries out, curses and begins wailing again. Stomping feet surge after her.

Cockroaches. In pursuit of a rat.

I use the moment, sneak into the middle room, the largest one. Same as Sonya's and Lenchka's, same...I freeze. In the double doors, paint chipped, glass panels broken, replaced with warped plywood. Hideous flesh-tone wallpaper, and on it...blood.

Streaks of blood, as if someone was chased around the room, bumping into walls, bleeding. Dark runnels on scuffed parquet floor covered with newspapers. No furniture except a bed by the wall. Soiled sheets, grimy pillow. Slept in, sallow from sweat. Three stools next to it, on one a plate of salami, a hunk of bread, bottles of vodka and Zhigulevskoe beer by its legs.

Zhigulevskoe, I think, absentmindedly. *Mama's favorite.*

There, by the window. Sickly New Year tree, same silver tinsel. And behind it. Feet, sticking out. I step closer. A crumpled figure of a man lying on the side. Stiff, unnaturally bent. It's clear he is dead, it's...I look, fascinated. His naked torso pins one arm to the floor, another one is flung over his face as if in protection. *He tried to shield himself, in his last moments*, I think. Feel a mixture of pity and gloating, creep closer. The boards creak, startle me. The belt of his trousers is unbuckled. I see his underwear, filthy. Rage rises within me, a wave, a storm. My teeth begin to chatter, my eyes get wet, and I shudder. Two meters between us, one. His legs have tangled in a fall, one foot caught on the blinking garland. Next to the other sits a torn polyethylene bag. White powder.

Drugs, I think.

I'm close enough to see his wounds. His stomach is a sieve, a bloody mess. Whoever killed him, was careless, mad. Suddenly his arm slips and thumps to the floor. If I could scream, I

would, but my vocal cords lock. His face. Nothing exists for me, but his face.

Roma.

Eyes blue, vacant, staring into nothing. Mouth half-open.

I'm incapable of thinking, cross into pure rage. Dimly hear Pavlik call me, feel his hands, brush him off. Step into the pool of Roma's blood with Margarita's slippers. Soft soles soak in the gore. I don't care.

You dick-stupid parasitic piece of scum. I raise my foot and kick him. In the groin. Kick him. *You low-life dumbass rapist.* I buffet his stomach, his chest, his face. The slippers make disgusting squelching noises. His body jerks lifelessly, eyes glassy, indifferent. It infuriates me even more. *Pervert! Wanker!* I scream in my head. *Misogynistic degenerate!* Kicking is not enough. I fall to my knees and fist him, methodically, like a machine, sense hands on me, trying to pull me away. Shouts. I resist, wriggle out. Punch more. Hands seize my armpits, drag me away.

"Stop! I said, stop it!" Someone's voice.

I don't know whose. Try to grab onto something, anything, to get back, to do more damage. My hands are sticky. Tears wet my eyes. And that smell, that smell of blood, in my hair, in my clothes.

I'm not done, I think, I just started!

My feet catch on some box, I stumble. Arms catch me, haul me into the corridor. *I hope your death was painful!* I want to yell this into Roma's face, dead or not. *I hope you suffered! I wish I was there to see it. I wish I was the one who killed you!*

They drag me away, carry me out of the apartment. I fight, scratch, but they are too many, too many, and I grow weak, and quiet, and let them. Let them take me through the hallway, to the kitchen. Drop me into a chair. A wet towel on my forehead. Fingers pry open my lips, shove pills in my mouth, hand me a glass of water. Urge me to swallow. Voices. Voices around.

I didn't, I realize. Didn't change. No mouse. I did it on my own, I...my head throbs, eyes hurt. I want to vomit. Retch. Someone helps me to the bathroom, helps me stick my head under cold water, let it run over my face.

I stand like this for a long time. Then I start laughing. Choke on the water, spit it out. Hold on to my belly and laugh. Laugh and laugh and—

Pavlik's face, white. No color. He's staring.

I fetch my breath, straiten.

"You scared me to death." He hands me a towel. "Why did you...why did you do it?"

I smile and hiccup. High. I feel high. *I kicked the shit out of him*, I think, grinning. *He's dead. Dead!*

"Look at me. Please." Pavlik lifts my chin. "This is bad. Mama and papa think you've gone crazy."

I have, I think, still grinning. So what, I don't care. Let them think what they want.

"I don't know what to tell them, Irina."

I falter. *What?*

"Honestly, I don't know anymore." He tugs on his hair. "Can you explain what's going on? You haven't been yourself lately, you know, always in your head, we hardly talk, and now this...I don't know what to think." His pupils widen.

The baby kicks.

You almost let the animal out.

Did I? I think.

Yes. Says the eaglet. But I'm still hungry.

You'll get the boar. I think. Promise. Soon.

I feel faint, sway, slump on the edge of the bathtub. Lean my head on Pavlik's stomach. He strokes my hair. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't really mean it, I...I don't think you're crazy." He pauses. "I saw what you wrote."

I raise my face.

"The wasp will kill the horsefly." He moistens his lips.

"The horsefly, that was...the guy, was it?"

I nod.

"Did you really know it would happen...ahead of time?"

I nod again.

"But...that's impossible." He rubs his face, studies me, a strange light in his eyes, a mix of fear and admiration. "You know, now that I think about it...if I were in your place, I would've done the same thing. I'm jealous, actually."

He holds my head. I clutch my arms around him. We stand. One minute, a couple, maybe more. Swaying gently, rocking. There are knocks on the door. "Can I come in?" Yulia.

She chases Pavlik out, throws me one of Margarita's robes to change into. Moth eaten plush, reddish-brown, like dead fox fur. Matted, smelling of mothballs. I strip, wash off the blood, don the robe, tie it with the belt. Look in the mirror. Victorious. Despite everything, I feel victorious. Elated. Smile and get out of the bathroom.

Poke around. It's quiet. The door into the only room is closed. Anton surfaces from the kitchen, nudges me to the wardrobe. "Get dressed." His words strike, sharp. I step into boots, fling on the coat, and before I can protest, mime for Pavlik, for pen and paper, he escorts me out of the apartment. The door into the flat across is closed. People mill around, chatting. We wait for the elevator, they stare at me. Small heads, compound eyes. Cockroaches.

We get out of the building and head to Anton's Lada. Pass a thin crowd of neighbors, no doubt discussing the murder and waiting for militia. It hasn't arrived yet.

No surprise there, I think. They're probably drunk.

Fresh snow crimps under my feet.

The sky is tinged pink. It's dawn. Pigeons coo on the frozen ground, pecking around in search of food. Breath puffs out of my nostrils. I glance about dazedly. Anton opens the passenger door, beckons me in. His face is stern, harried. "Get in, quick!" His Lada is jammed between a Niva and a rusty Zaporozhets. I squeeze in, shiver. The vinyl seat is cold, the air is freezing. My skin erupts in goosebumps.

Anton slams the door, starts the engine. Idles. We sit like this, silent, waiting for it to warm up. I don't dare to tap him on the shoulder, to inquire about Pavlik. Scan the sky, the road. No ravens, no vultures, no beasts of any kind. Good.

I let out air and stop abruptly.

Anton shifts gears, backs out. And I stare. And stare. Twist around, to continue looking out of the back window. Behind us, in the line of parked cars, a black Boomer. Between a frosted Moskvich and an old Volga. It's clean, polished, not a trace of snow on it. As if it didn't spend the night on the street. Next to it, that woman. The rat. She takes something from a gloved hand through a window crack, stashes it into her

bra, scurries off. Looks around, jittery, intercepts my glance.

There is a second we share, a moment, when our eyes lock.

Something in them, to me, a warning. And then, indifference. She vanishes into the entranceway.

The Boomer starts moving after us.

I grip the seat, turn around.

It's them, I think. I know it's them.

The ravens.

Chapter 17. Owl

I pass out in the car. Claws. Claws on my shoulders. Shake me. I sleepwalk to bed, drop into nothing. Into darkness. Dreamless, empty. Wake up alone. Sit up, heart ramming in my chest. What time is it, what day? What happened? My bladder burns. I look at the clock on the desk. Almost eight. Eight at night? No, it's morning. The blackness behind the window, too thin. The glowing orbs of streetlights, dim. Soft falling snow. *I slept all day and all night*, I think, step into slippers, rub my face. Faint teakettle whistle. Footfalls. The whistle chokes and peters out.

I waddle to the toilet, pee, enter the kitchen.

Anton and Yulia, irked, alert, evidently having been awaiting me for a while.

Where is Pavlik? I think.

They read it on my face.

"Pavlik is with his grandmother, Irina. Please." Yulia beckons me to sit down.

Anton is perched on the edge of the seat, like he's about to lose it. Smacks my notepad on the table with that gluey sticky noise. "Explain." It's not a request, it's a command. He holds out a pen. I take it.

"Go on." He says. Droplets of sweat prickle his forehead. He takes off his glasses, wipes them on his flannel shirt, puts them back on.

I study him questioningly.

"Please." He points. "Start from the very beginning. When you stopped talking, what was the cause, have you been able to talk before or not. Any genetic deviations in your family, terminal diseases, health problems. Everything you know."

Is this an interrogation? I think. You sent Pavlik off so you could harass me without him?

He measures me with a shrewd look. "Here is what I think, Irina. I think you're fooling us. Either that, or you are, indeed, a bit soft upstairs." He knocks on his broad head. "Wouldn't you agree, Yulechka?"

"Absolutely." She hisses, stings me with her stare.

I seethe. This automatic assumption that if you're mute, you're an imbecile, is really getting on my nerves. I thought you were educated people.

"Tea?" Asks Yulia, mocking, pours me a cup without waiting for a nod or for any reaction whatsoever.

"Irina, please understand. We're simply trying to rule out any...pathologies." Says Anton helpfully. "This doesn't concern you alone, this concerns Pavlusha's child, our grandchild."

I nearly spit out my tea. *You must be what, in your fifties? Well-read, I assume. Yet you believe that I'm mentally unstable because I'm mute and I kicked a dead man. More, you believe my child will be predisposed to the same, as you call them, pathologies. Just because I did what I did, doesn't mean I'm nuts, doesn't mean my child will be a killer, Anton. I see you know jack-shit about life, which is, frankly, amusing.*

"Well?" He prompts.

Yulia crosses her arms.

I grip the pen so hard, I'm afraid I'll break it.

Your logic, I think, unable to write, glaring at them, words crowded behind my teeth, my muscles tense to the point of snapping, your logic points me to either stagnant thinking or complete ignorance. Have you noticed that your son is gay? No? Of course not. And even if you did, the first thing you'd do is cast him aside because he doesn't fit your image of the perfect son. Because he has a...pathology.

I groan. Wish I could say it, wish I could throw it in their faces. It'd be so much more effective than writing, so...I know. I write one word, push the notepad across the table.

"No."

Anton cradles his temples. "What is this. How am I to understand that? No, you don't know how to answer, or no, you refuse to answer?"

I smile. *Guess.*

He takes it as a warning sign, a sign of my incomprehension. Throws a worried look at Yulia. She nods, imperceptibly, as if giving him permission to continue.

"Or *no*, you don't understand what I'm asking of you?" He makes to stand up, his round eyes about to pop out of his sockets, hands fisted, ready to punch me.

"Anton." Says Yulia, touches his arm.

"No, this is outrageous." He plops back down. "We're wasting our time. Can't you see she's playing us?" He rises, catches on the edge of the table. Spoons clink, tea slopes over.

"See, if you'd only listen to me," taunts Yulia, mops up the spilled tea with a towel.

They talk like I'm not there.

"But Yulechka, if it's not genetic, how else would you explain her behavior?" Insists Anton.

"I told you, we need to talk to her mother." Says Yulia.

Good luck, I think. *If you can catch her sober.* I marvel at my calm. This is strange. My future is at stake, yet I don't flinch, don't panic. No sign of the mouse. Instead, something else. Something...sharp. Growing.

Anton doesn't answer, draws the curtain, watches the snow.

I follow his gaze, search for shapes, winged shapes.
 Ravens. *How much longer, before you strike?* I think. *How much longer?*

Yulia spoons sugar into her cup, swills it. "Irina. I'll be straightforward with you, all right? We're taking you into our family without knowing anything about you. It's a big and scary step for us." She pauses. "We're doing it for Pavlusha, obviously. He seems to love you very much."

My heart clenches. *If you only knew.*

"Personally," continues Yulia, so controlled, so well-mannered, "I have my reservations. You'll understand," she narrows her eyes to slits, "when you become a *mother*."

"Well, how about this. Do us a favor, Irina." Anton turns away from the window, his ire gone. "The sooner we get over this, the sooner we can move on to pleasant things. The wedding, the restaurant, the rings, your dress. Your *jewelry*."

And it gets me. Absurdly, it gets me. I perk up. They see excitement on my face, exchange a glance.

You know who you are, Irina Myshko? I think, stewing. *You're a bribable doormat.* But I can't help it, can't...flashes in my mind. Pictures. Brilliant, vivid. Flowers, white silk, bridal veil, and...kissing. My face burns. *Kissing! He'd have to kiss me, in front of them, he'd have to...*then, immediately,

fear. Terror. They'll find out. Soon, they'll find out, and it's back to shithole, back to the bed in the woods. Back to Lyosha.

Life breaks inside me.

I take the notepad and write. Write about mama, school, home. About grandma, Sonya, Lenchka. Dogs, cats. And Lyosha. But nothing, nothing about his cock ripping me every night. For a year. I write I had a fight with mama, ran away. End with, "I fell out of my crib when I was two, bit my tongue and stopped talking." Drop pen, exhausted.

"And the phone number, please." Says Yulia sweetly.

I write it.

The clock strikes nine.

"One more thing." Anton inclines his head. "What made you hit that unfortunate young man?"

"He hurt me."

"You knew him?"

"Hurt you how?" Asks Yulia.

Ever had horseflies bite your cunt? I slam the pen down.

They leave me alone. Let me go. Let me bury my head under the pillow. I sob into sheets, until I can't. Until there is nothing. Can't anymore. Pavlik. Still not here, Pavlik.

"Irina? Get dressed, we're leaving." Yulia's voice through the door. That means I have at least another twenty minutes.

My stomach fills with ice. *Already? Today? Does it have to end today?* I pick out clothes with unbending fingers, hear her dialing, walk out, sit on the folded sofa. *Will they be able to tell right away?* I think. *Will they?* Clasp my belly, wait.

She looks up at me with her acid eyes, receiver pressed between her cheek and shoulder, zips up leather boots. "Hello?"

"Who is this?" Cries the receiver.

She winces, takes it away from her ear. "Good morning. My name is Yulia Ibragimovna—"

"Who?" Yells the voice. "Kesha, get off me, you dumb bitch! Say again?" There is muffled barking.

Hey there, grandma, how very nice to hear you, I think.

"One more time, my name is Irina Ibragimovna Baboch." She repeats patiently. "I have your Irina here. Irina Myshko. She's been living with us for a couple months now."

"Who? Irka? *Where?*"

"Right *here*, sitting in front of me."

"Irkadura? Marina, it's Irka! Quick!"

Yulia studies the receiver with aversion.

It cries, slurry. "Hello? Hello? Who is this? Hello?"

"Yes?" Says Yulia.

"My daughter?" The voice is thick with static. Yulia holds the receiver away from her face. "Where is my daughter? Who are you? Do you have her? For how long? What nightmare! I went

through such nightmare! I thought they shot her by the White House!"

Get a grip, mama, I think. Yet I like it, revel in her reaction. Is that true? Does she actually care?

"Please, calm down. She is fine." Yulia is saying. Waves me off, to put on coat and boots. I do. My legs are suddenly full of water, ears stuffed with cotton. I move in a fog. Lost, so lost. Hear the phone click, follow Yulia out, trail behind her.

Mama, I think. Mama. And then, pathology. Anton said. What if I do have some pathology? Can they test for this? Can they...test for paternity?

An hour later we exit Nogin's Square station. Old Moscow. Nipping wind. Grey sky over three-story buildings. Scuffed stuccoed facades. Trucks rumble through the street. Hunched figures scurry by, bundled from head to toe.

I shiver, stuff my mittened hands into pockets, hurry after Yulia, along the pathway stomped in the snow by hundreds of feet. Two lanes of traffic grind in the road. Sloped roofs, icicles, poles, wires. Not a pigeon on them, not a vulture or a raven.

I don't like this, I think. And every step is a step closer to denouement. Closer to the end.

We pass a church, a bakery with its bread smell, a bank, a couple shoe stores, cross the street, enter a low arched

passageway that leads into a web of inner courtyards. I can hardly keep up with Yulia, pant from effort.

She talks non-stop, waves her gloved hand for emphasis. How she took precious time out of her day to take me to her gynecologist, how Karina Semyonovna is hard to get an appointment with, how it's a privilege that she agreed to see me in the first place, that of course it was only due to Yulia, and that I should be thankful, and—

I stop listening. Notice movement a couple meters behind us. A black Boomer. Its headlights blink. We're in the narrow alleyway, waist-high walls of dirty snow on either side.

"Watch out!" Yulia yanks me out of the way.

I press flat against the bank.

The car whispers by. The passenger window rolls down. A man grins at me. Shaved head, black garb, blunt rosy face. Young. Behind him, the driver, sallow, fleshy. He ogles my breasts, strips me with his raunchy stare. Black coat, black cap, black unspoken words. My spine is ice. I grope behind me for purchase.

The car passes, vanishes into the archway.

Ravens, I think, with beaks long enough to tear out bowels, still steaming. Citizens! We freed Mother Russia from a homo Jew, his whore and their bastard! I shudder. Fucking chauvinistic crooks.

A raven croaks in the distance. Like it heard me.

My heart does a summersault.

"So polite." Says Yulia, motioning after the car.

I stare at her.

"Just like our Pavlusha. Didn't honk, didn't curse, only slowed down and waited for us to notice. Now that's a quality of educated men with heads on their shoulders and money in their pockets." She measures me. "You need to learn how to make a living, Irina, to stand your own two feet."

I can't believe my ears. *Is this a ploy to make me bring dough in the family so I don't sit on your son's neck? Or do you miraculously give a fuck?*

"Men know nothing about bearing children. They come and go." Says Yulia. Warm air escapes her painted mouth. "We, women, take the brunt of it. If anything happened to Anton, God forbid, I have the means to carry on alone. Do you?"

I blink. *I have my fat ass to fall on.*

"No." She insists. "You have *nothing*, Irina. Not even a degree. How will you get on in life? Get that acting job, make sure Simeon Ignatievich pays you. He seems to have a thing for you. Use it. Get along, get ahead. You're a bit chunky, but no matter. You'll lose weight after the baby is born."

I stop breathing. *Use Sim? Like, grow a dick and let him suck it? You're completely blind, are you?*

A Zhiguli honks at us, we press into the bank to let it through. Kids shoot down the icy slide on the playground, shouting, laughing.

"You think I don't like you?" Continues Yulia. "You're wrong. I'm simply cautious, like any mother." She lifts her collar, wind ruffles the fur of her hat. "You'd do the same for you child, right?" She's close, a touch away, eyes two icicles. "Irina, tell me the truth." Draws breath. "Is Pavlusha...the father?"

For a split second I'm caught off-guard, then slowly nod.

"Good. Let's go. We're late." She grabs my hand.

First time she touched me.

First time.

I burn from shame, trot behind her.

Chapter 18. Salamander

We turn a corner. A grunt. Grunts at my feet. I jump, frantic. *The boar!* A sniffing snout, tusks. Two piggy eyes on me, and I'm...no. It's only a dog. It barks, hairy mongrel. "Shoo!" Yulia waves it off with her purse. It whimpers and bolts. My pulse, so loud in my ears. Up on the roofs, are they? Nothing. No ravens, a few frozen pigeons. I breathe. This gets me thinking, this noise. This surprise. It's something...I don't have it. Had it, lost it. Don't know how to find it, how to...I squeeze Yulia's hand.

Tell them, I think.

What? Says the eaglet.

I need to tell them to piss off.

Yes, says the eaglet. You do.

Well, thank you for encouragement. I think.

Let the—

I got it, I got it! You told me already. But how do I do it, exactly? How? Every time I try, it doesn't want to, it doesn't...it gets stuck in my throat and...

Go back and remember. Says the eaglet, petulant. Besides, I want my boar.

What if I don't want to go back?

You promised.

My foot bumps into a stair. I don't see where I'm going.

We've arrived.

A two-story building squats between an apartment block and a squalid government institution. A signboard above the entrance says City Polyclinic Number 223. People come and go through the flapping door, pregnant women, mothers with little children, with babes in arms. Empty prams are parked by the porch. A lone nervous father in a tattered coat and a beanie jumps from foot to foot, smokes a cigarette.

"Hurry, hurry!" Yulia drags me through the door.

It's warm here. Stuffy, like in a banya. The lobby is packed. Women sitting, standing, waiting. Yulia jostles through, to the glass window with REGISTRATION stenciled on it in scuffed blue letters.

A girl there, so large, her coat won't button all the way. Sweaty, panting. Takes a booklet from the slot, leaves the window. She's sixteen, seventeen? Younger? Next in line, a tired-looking mother, frail, sullen, a newborn in her arms, swaddled in a check blanket, tied with a bow.

Yulia shoulders her out of the way. "Good afternoon, we're to see Karina Semyonovna."

"Lady!" Pipes the mother, outraged. "What are you...it's my turn!" Her baby begins to cry. Weak, mewling.

"Name." Says the nurse in the booth, fat, buxom, face frost-bitten, red.

Like a boiled crayfish, I think.

"Myshko, Irina." Answers Yulia.

"Lady, you hear me?" The mother taps her shoulder. "Move, please."

Yulia shrugs her off.

The nurse slides a medical record book in the slot. "Second floor, room thirty four."

"Hey, damsel, there is a line here!" Shouts a voice.

"My turn! It was my turn!" Exclaims the upset mother. Her baby's cries escalate to wails. Other babies join.

"Some women have no shame!" Yells someone from the crowd.

More calls, accusations. Rebukes.

Yulia doesn't flinch, doesn't say anything, doesn't react at all. She seizes the booklet and pulls me away, implacable, up the stairs to the second floor. Voices after us, warnings. "Don't mind them," she hisses.

I stumble on the last stair. It smells of medicine and chlorine here. My boot soles squeak on linoleum. We rush along the hallway. Doors, doors, doors. And benches. Vinyl-covered benches along the walls, occupied by women in all stages of

ripeness. Silent, expectant. Stupefied from the long wait. Some knit, some scan magazines, others just stare into nothing.

Cows, I think. Bloated cows. Soon I'll look the same.

Yulia undresses as she goes, motions me to do the same. I pull off my coat on the run, stuff cap and mittens in the sleeve. We reach the door at the end of the corridor. It opens. A doctor comes out, puny, slim. Starched white coat. Skin bronzed, shiny, slimy almost, eyes slanted. Dark hair slicked into a bun.

A toxic salamander, I think, viper's best friend.

"Finally." She scoffs.

"Karina!" Yulia exclaims. "We were just—"

"I started to think you wouldn't show." She interrupts.

There are about ten women sitting by the door, on two benches. They stir, glare at us. One of them rises, arms akimbo. "Excuse me, Karina Semyonovna, but I'm next."

"No. This woman here told me I'm next." Says her dumpy neighbor, points to a figure slumped in the chair, dozing.

"But I've been waiting for two hours!"

"And I haven't? I took my place in line like all of us did, didn't I? Girls, tell her."

"That's right, doctor. We've all been waiting. Why does she get to skip ahead?"

Karina doesn't say a word, ushers us into her cabinet and shuts the door. The room is small and shabby. A peeling writing desk, a cot, couple stools, a gynecological chair, a dying plant in the pot by the window. Grey daylight. The drone of traffic in the street below.

"Karina? This is for you." Yulia digs into her purse and produces a box of chocolates and a small bottle of liqueur.

"What's this for, Yulia? I don't need it. Put it away, put it away." Karina pushes the bribe aside, unconvincingly.

"No-no. Please. I insist."

The mandatory tug-of-war, I think. Breathe deep, trying to calm down, to stop jittering. How will I look her in the face? How?

The candy and the bottle tucked away into the desk, Karina asks me to undress. I turn away, take my time to unbutton my shirt, get out of my pants. My nerves are on fire, legs, arms numb. And I go. Go to my death. But I can't refuse, I can't. Maybe there is a chance, and they won't. Who knows. Maybe. I plop on the vinyl seat, recline, and wince. The metal of the feet holders is cold. Freezing.

My scaffold, I think. *This is my scaffold*.

Karina snaps on gloves, unceremoniously feels me out, palpates my belly. "Five months, most likely more. Why didn't you come in earlier?"

"Oh, it's all work, work. You know, busy." Yulia smiles, then adds, as an afterthought. "Those tests we talked about..."

"For paternity?" Drops Karina.

My heart stills.

"Well, yes, that too, but I'm more worried about any pathologies. I want to make sure—"

"She really doesn't talk? Strange." Karina ogles me with her slanted eyes, whispers to Yulia. "Are you afraid the baby might have a speech defect?"

I hear every word.

There's an angry knock on the door. "Karina Semyonovna?"

She marches over, yanks it open, and shouts. "You get in when you get in! I don't have ten arms. Now, if you'll stop interrupting me, you'll get in faster."

"But Karina Semyonovna, I've been waiting for two hours already. My daughter is sick at home, she's only seven—"

The doctor slams the door in the woman's face.

"They think I'm their slave." She comments crossly. "I get paid meager kopecks to deal with this rubbish, every day, eight to six. And they never stop trying, the stories they tell, you should hear, Yulia. Now I forgot what I was going to do." She slaps her sides.

"Tests?" Suggests Yulia. "An ultrasound?"

An ultrasound. The heart pounds in my chest so hard, I feel faint. Eaglet, I think, I will see you.

Silence.

My hands shake, and I'm sweaty. Sweaty and stinky with fear. Eaglet? I try again. I think I know.

Karina studies me. "I'll take blood and urine, but for paternity, I don't know...it's expensive," a greedy glint in her eyes, "I'd need DNA samples from both parents and the child."

"Oh." Says Yulia, face sunken, disappointed. "How much?"

And the child. My ears buzz. I sense relief, a wave of relief. I'm okay, at least until...

What's that you know? Asks the eaglet, curious.

Who you are.

Do you?

Yes, I think. A boy.

Eaglet is silent, then, how?

It's just, the way you talk, I think. You never doubt, you're firm, sure...you fill me with...I want to destroy them, eaglet. To hurt them, wound them, kill them. Them, who caused me pain, I want to rip them, grind them to dirt. Until they're gone. Until they're—

Dirt. Says the eaglet. Worms. It shifts. I can feel it squirming, kicking. I'm hungry.

I know. I think. Soon.

Do I get it whole?

Yes. From heart to lungs to liver. All yours, except its dick. The dick is mine. It's something for me to hold on to, while I gut it.

Okay, says the eaglet.

Eaglet?

Yes?

I'm ushered off the chair, to the toilet, to piss in the cup. A nurse pokes my fingers, my veins, drains my blood. I'm there and not there.

Eaglet?

What is it?

I dress, walk, to another room, to another vinyl bench. The desk, the screen, the jelly on my skin. Different nurse. Yulia there, looking. Karina Semyonovna. Voices. Voices. It flickers, the image, white lines on black. Outlines. It's transparent, the shape...and I see it.

Eaglet?

I'm here.

Eaglet!

I'm here!

The head. It turns. Imperceptibly. An arm, tiny, fully formed, moves like it waves, like it...wants to rise, to grow.

Into a wing. Two wings, to fly, to...I can't see, it's blurry, my eyes are blurry. Burning, wet.

Eaglet?

Mama?

I float back to the metro. Like I'm a bird, like I'm...I don't know anymore, don't care. Only, this feeling. Street pigeons peck at a discarded loaf of bread, people walk by, oblivious, grim. Snow creaks underfoot. *The wedding*, I think. *The butterfly and...and what? The eagle? Will it happen? Will it?*

I trail after Yulia. Grocery store, flower shop, the underpass to Nogin's Square metro station. In the vestibule she waves me to stop, makes calls from the pay phone by the ticketing booth. Commuters straggle by, slow, sleepy, as if in hibernation.

I watch them, thinking, *I will do it, eaglet. For you. I will learn. I will learn how to talk.*

We get home at dusk.

Pavlik and Anton rise from the sofa, rush to us, chanting as one. "Who? Who?"

"A boy." Answers Yulia. Genuinely happy. Is it possible? Is it? There is a stretch of time, a few minutes, maybe, when it's good. All good and warm. Congratulations, well wishes, hands,

faces, smiles, awkward hugs, kisses, pats on the backs. And then it's broken.

"What took you so long? I was beginning to worry." Grumbles Anton. "You said five is when we have to be there?"

Be where? And I know.

"We can be a little late. They can wait. Look, I got the cake, some smoked meat and bread." Yulia takes off her coat, neatly slides it on the hanger.

Pavlik is next to me. Eyes searching, nervous. "A son. We're having a son. That's great news." He minces, touches my arm. "Anything else...?" Steals a glance back. Are they watching us? Are they listening?

I shake my head slightly, flip up a thumb, *it's okay, nobody knows, don't worry.*

He shifts uneasily. "Sorry I couldn't make it to go with you. Grandmother...well, I had to stay a little longer..."

"How is she?" Asks Yulia from the parlor, searching for something in her dresser.

"Good. Never better." Pavlik calls. "Frankly, I don't understand why you asked me to spend time with her in the first place. She was absolutely fine."

"Are we even discussing this?"

He makes a cutting motion across his neck, like he's had it, whispers. "How should we call him?"

I shrug.

He suddenly lifts my face, brushes my lips with his. Dry. Nothing more. It's enough to me dizzy. "It's strange, but I'm happy." He whispers. "Are you happy?"

I pitch, hide my face in his chest. In his shirt. It's good, good to stand like this. They can't see...they can't see. He holds me carefully, like a bowl of water, like it's about to spill. And I am. I am.

"Well, that's enough." Anton's voice, uncomfortable. "No use standing there. Come on. We don't want to be late."

We part.

Chapter 19. Louse

I hiccup, full. Full of hastily swallowed chicken cutlet and a glass of yoghurt. Climb into Anton's car after Pavlik. It's cold, an hour from sunset. The sky is indigo, faint with stars. Mothers with prams stroll around the yard, children fight over a piece of cardboard by the ice slide. Voices, dog barks. Glowing yellow windows. Behind them, the warmth of cabbage soup, bone marrow spread on dark bread, television and vodka.

The car moves slowly. Evening traffic, stop and go. Anton curses under his breath. Nonchalant, composed, Yulia does her makeup.

"Tests?" Pavlik writes on the pad.

I snatch the pen from him. "They need DNA samples from both parents and the child."

"And then?" He looks at me, frightened.

I nod.

He sucks in air.

Anton stops on the red light, swears. Yulia placates him, whispering something.

"We have over three months," I write, "we can—" follow Pavlik's gaze.

He stares at a Moskvich parked by the curb. KILL A FAG SAVE THE PLANET is scrawled on its snow-covered window.

Light turns green, the car jolts.

"Fucking ravens." I write. "They followed me today."

Pavlik studies me, no face in the dark. "What?"

"Black Boomer." I write. "When we went to see the doctor. They trailed me, I think. I'm positive. Have you gotten any more threats in the mail?"

He averts his eyes. Fingers laced, trembling.

"Tell Sim." I write. "He'll think of something. It can't go on like this forever, they *will* strike, you know." I pause and add. "I think you need to tell your parents that you're—"

His eyes flash, incensed. He wrests the notepad from my hand, tears off the page, crumples it, winds down the window and throws it out. Cold wind drifts in, blares, squealing tires, a street vendor's cry, "Chiburekki! Hot Chiburekki!"

"Pavlusha!" Yulia cries. "Close it. It's freezing!"

"With pleasure, mama." Says Pavlik through teeth. He's on the edge, I can sense it, can feel it. And I'm with him, I'm there. It tugs at me, it echoes. Old, familiar. No, not right now. I peer into darkness. Streetlights, storefronts blind me, make it hard to see, to grope for. In the texture. Feel for.

I close my eyes.

We screech to a stop.

"This is outrageous! Simply outrageous!" Anton's voice, high, upset. "Where are all the snowblowers, I'd like to know?"

"On strike, where else?" Yulia, knowing, derisive. "Less work, more drinking."

"We won't make it at five, Yulechka. Not at this pace."

"Calm down. We'll get there when we get there."

A barb. A presence. A prickle in the back of my neck. I open my eyes, alert. *Come out, I think. I know you're here. This hide-and-seek makes me sick.*

Green light. We take off in the midst of confusion. Five street lanes, packed. Cars, buses, trucks, and snow. Melted dirty snow. Anton spins the wheel, turns right. Ahead, a metro station. Swarms of pedestrians press on either side of the road, waiting for the light to turn, eager to cross.

My heart cramps. There. I hold my breath, listen. That buzz again, harsh, whirring. It coils and loops, the noise flies make when feasting on rotten offal. *A death, I think, a death is coming.* It's a signal for me, like they're saying, *watch what will happen.* The beasts. Only not the wasp this time, not the horsefly. The ravens. The ravens and the vulture.

The crosswalk, some thirty meters away.

Twenty meters, ten.

I squint at the mass of bodies on the right. One of them I know. Bent, old. Face covered with flies, a moving blanket. And

that drone, that sluggish drone. I cover my ears, as if it would help. The old woman, the hag, head wrapped in a grey downy headscarf, a cane in one arm, an oilcloth bag in another.

The vulture, I think, nudge Pavlik.

He looks at me, irritated. "What?"

I point.

"What is it?"

The vulture that hit Kostya's car, I want to say. Grope for the notepad, can't find it. I can feel it, any second now. We're almost at the intersection, first car in the fourth lane. And behind us, a pace behind us, in the parallel lane by the sidewalk...

She will die, I think with horrifying clarity.

It happens in the matter of seconds.

The light turns red.

Anton slams on the break.

The hag hikes up her coat, hobbles over the curb and staggers into the street, cane thrust upward like a probing claw. Indignant, hateful. She's first, the rest of the pedestrians are still waiting for the traffic to stop. A pair of headlights splash her. She momentarily stops, mouth agape. Our Lada is meters away. I glimpse her face, wrinkled, startled. Shreds of greasy hair escape her headscarf. She hasn't realized yet what's about to happen, probably never would.

Get back! I wave frantically. *Back to the curb! Now!*

It's futile. A black car with tinted windows slams into her full speed. Her body, light like a ragdoll, flies up, bumps the windshield once, cracks it, bounces upward, rolls along the roof, hits the trunk, turns once more, and drops on the road.

"She got hit!" Cries Yulia. "She got hit!"

"Oh God." Pavlik mumbles.

"Who got hit?" Anton leans over Yulia.

There is a rush of bodies. Pedestrians. Drivers step out of cars. Honks. Chaos. I'm immobile, staring ahead, watching the lights. Red lights of the Boomer. They flash and vanish in a side alley. And I hear them, hear them cracking up, hysterical, bestial. Drunk. *You bastards*, I think, *damn prick-stupid blockheads. I'd love to cut off your cocks and stuff them down your throats so you'll choke on your own junk.*

"Did you...know it would happen?" Pavlik, quietly, beside me. I'm too mad to react. Mad at him, mad at them. Mad at everything and everyone.

Anton climbs back in. His face is white.

The car is struck with silence. No talk for the rest of the ride, not a word. It's dark now. Dingy streets, I recognize them, one by one, and then, Brezhnevka. Ominous in the night. My heart skips. How long has it been? Since September. I glance up

at the ninth floor, out of habit. Same windows, same glaring light from the naked forty-watt bulb. Same orange curtains.

Orange.

I squint my eyes, hard, harder. *Go back*, I think, *I have to go back. To remember.*

And to feed me, echoes the eaglet. *Don't forget to feed me.*

I won't. I think. I won't.

Anton parks the Lada at the curb across the entranceway. I get out last. Every movement takes time, every step, every flex of the muscle. Resisting, refusing.

An old woman sits on the bench by the entrance, in the yellow ring of light. Felt boots, rubber overshoes, mangy coat, tattered fur hat. She waves, struggles to get up.

Prasha, I think. *You bawdy louse, what are you freezing your tail off for?* I puff up my coat, try to shrink inside it, to get rid of that bump in the middle. Then stop. No use. Tomorrow they'll all know anyway.

"Irka!" She peeps. Puffs of warm air escape her thin mouth. "It's the angels! The angels brought you back! I just knew it. I put up a candle for you, every time I go to church. Every time." She hobbles up to Pavlik, her overshoes scrunching the snow. "Is that the groom then? Come here. Lemme see."

He looks at me, puzzled.

Our neighbor, Prasha. I think. If she's here, the whole house knows about our visit and the reason for it.

"Irka's mute, don't you know? No good looking at her." Prasha snaps, offers a shaky hand. "Praskovya Aleksandrovna. I'm their neighbor, from across the landing. Thirty five years here, since it was built. I used to work with Valentina at the same hospital."

"Pavel Baboch," says Pavlik, shakes her hand, hesitant. "Nice to meet you."

"Valentina...?" Asks Yulia.

"Her grandmother. Didn't she tell you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, she did."

Anton and Yulia exchange a glance.

"What a fine boy you found, eh?" Prasha chews on her toothless mouth. "Good catch, Irka. Atta girl!" She titters, grabs his cheeks, twists his face this way and that. Pavlik is so surprised, he doesn't resist her. "Oh, those coal eyes you've got. Those coal eyes! What wouldn't I give to be young again, I'd fetch him for myself." She lets go abruptly, wobbles up to me. "Show me." Pats my belly.

I throw a furious glance at Yulia. *You told them?*

She averts her eyes, pretends she doesn't notice.

"Good. Good. You'll have a beautiful baby from this boy. Go in then!" She gestures to the door. "They been waiting and

waiting. I started to think I'd freeze my butt to the bench!"

She sniggers, pulls the door open.

I step in. Familiar smell. Piss, rot, sour soup, rancid garbage. *Home*, I think, *I used to call this home*. It's both nostalgic and unsettling. Sweet and disgusting. I want to run, jump out of my skin and spring without turning. Yet I can't. I promised the eaglet. Promised. Can't back out now. I must go, I must do it, I must...I force myself, mount the steps.

Prasha chats nonstop. "I knew Irka since she was *this* little." She spreads her arms half-a-meter apart. "So small, she was, so skinny! Look at her now! How she rounded out. Atta girl. She like daughter to me."

I'm like daughter to no one, I think.

Prasha pushes the elevator button, it glowers red. Several floors above it whines to life, labors down.

"Fed her, watched her." Continues Prasha, words punctured with saliva. "Valentina went to work at the crack of dawn, every God's morning. She'd wake me up with the bell, leave her with me. I was retired by then, you see, it was all the same to me when to wake up, could always lie down and rest. Well then, what was it I was saying...ah, Valentina! She's nurse, an honest woman. God forbid to have a child like her Marinka, that's one worthless *dura*, I tell you. Shouldn't of been allowed to have children, woman like her. Whore, is what she is. Squeezed Irka

out and phew! Vanished. Men, men. Only men on her mind. Brought one mongrel home after another. Poor Valentina. Scum, all of them. Alcoholics." Prasha hawks up a gob and spits. It plops on the floor with a smack.

There is a pause. Loud silence. The whiz of machinery. Pavlik raises a brow at me. I roll my eyes. Anton and Yulia study Prasha with dislike.

Wait till you see my family, I smirk. Prasha is nothing. You're in for an unforgettable surprise.

The cabin thumps to a stop, yawns open.

After two months of living in a building without an elevator, I peek inside with distrust. Same ugly linoleum floor, same walls spray-painted with SPARTAK CHAMPION next to a panel with black buttons. White indented numbers, worn, some illegible. And that stink. Cigarette smoke and machine oil.

Prasha stomps in first, I'm last. There's barely room for five people. I push the last button, number nine. Sliding doors roll shut. The elevator jerks upward.

And Prasha talks. And talks. And talks. Fast, greedy, as if she's afraid she won't be able to fit it all in. My whole life history. How I was born weak and small. How I was often sick. How I wet the bed to fifth grade. How mama beat me for it each morning. How our dogs and cats pissed through the floor and the neighbors below, a respectable couple, complained, because the

urine corrupted their ceiling. How Sonya fucked some new Russian millionaire and got ditched after he found out she had a daughter. How Marina and Lyosha—

The doors mercifully open.

I stagger out, gulp air.

Door, to the right. That same door. In my face. Bottom corner chewed off by animals, plastic numbers 275 above the spy-hole, the metal handle polished with wear. Prasha pushes me aside and rings the bell. It ding-dongs. A bark, uncertain at first. Then a volley of them. A screech of a cat.

"Valentina, open up! It's Prasha!" She yells into the crack. "Marinka? I brought you your daughter, *dura!*"

"Praskovya Aleksandrovna," says Yulia sweetly, "thank you so much for your help. I think we're good now."

"Yes, thank you." Picks up Anton. "You were very helpful. Good night."

"Don't mind us, Praskovya Aleksandrovna," says Pavlik apologetically, "we're late and in a hurry."

She grumbles something, scoops me up, like she used to, always used to, crushes me, smooches me with her dry lips, retreats across the landing, fumbles with keys.

I turn around, face the door. Breathless.

It bangs open.

Chapter 20. Cockroach

I cover my nose. From the doorway, that reek, that sour odor I detest. It strikes me, a solid physical thing. Old sweat, animal stink, the smell of unwashed linen. Alcohol fumes. Badly cooked food. Too much fat, too much salt. A vapor that permeates my clothes. I used to smell like that, my hair, my skin. It infiltrated me to the bones. My eyes water. I blink, and I see them.

All of them.

They're there, standing, waiting. Bound by some incalculable amount of time, an absence. The gap between before and after. I see them, a picture. Mama, Lyosha. Sonya with Lenchka, grandma behind them. Slovenly, cloddish, poor. Kesha and Kasha yelp, wag their tails.

I give them my palms to lick.

The picture flickers.

Beasts. The catfish, the boar, two herrings, the cockroach behind them. Huge, lurid, with shifting antennae and clicking mandibles.

People, beasts, people—

I take a breath.

"Daughter!" Mama cries, flings herself on me. "My daughter!" I reel under her weight. Clammy skin, flabby fleshy hold. This affection she always displays in front of strangers, exaggerated attachment diametrically opposite to the hatred she gives me one-on-one.

I stiffen. Her hangover, in my face.

Kesha and Kasha bark with abandon, scratch my legs. "Get off her! Damn dogs." Mama kicks them, they whelp, tuck tails, run off. She strokes my hair, eyes glazed, unfocused. "Irka! Irka, look at me. I thought you died! Daughter, my daughter...what is it, don't you want to kiss me?"

Would you want to kiss a catfish? I think with revulsion.

She whispers in my ear, slurry. "When you left...I woke up, and I thought, something's wrong. Something's missing. I just knew it. Why, Irka? Why did you leave me like that? Have you no heart? Don't you love your mama? You should've asked them to call us earlier. I've gone grey worried about you." She lets go, purses her lips. "Now look at you, pregnant. If you would've stayed, none of this would've happened."

I want to slap her, clench my fists to stay put.

Then I'm inside.

Back. Back in the dump. The door behind me shuts, traps me. This again. Narrow corridor. Rotten parquet, dusty, strewn with hairballs, soup bones picked clean, dirty bowls, yellow dabs of

cockroach poison. Warped wallpaper scribbled with phone numbers, cracked rotary dial phone on top of the dresser with most of its drawers missing. Hooks driven into cement, overtaxed with hats, coats, jackets. Dilapidated wardrobe. Cardboard boxes on top, spilling rags, shoes, a pair of my ice skates, same place I put them three years ago. No lampshades, all smashed in the heat of drunken fights between mama and Lyosha, or mama and whomever she imagined, battering air. Too many people, not enough space. Bustle, shuffle, faces, voices.

I hold on to the wall.

"You look fat." That's auntie Sonya, matter-of-factly.

"*Irkadura* got knocked up! *Irkadura* got knocked up!"

Lenochka bounces up and down. Sonya smacks her across the face, she scowls, falls quiet.

"Come in, come in." Grandma wipes hands on a greasy apron. "I've just washed the floors." She eyes the hallway. "Cursed animals, devil take them. All that hair! The minute I clean up, it's dirty again! Can you believe it?" She claps hands, tips her head back and bursts into hoarse laughter. I don't want to see this, don't want to listen to this.

Feel the stare, the breath on my back.

The boar! The boar! Says the eaglet. *I get to eat the boar!*

Yes, I think. *You do.*

Lyosha grunts, and I turn to face him.

Unbuttoned shirt, hairy belly, chest. Piggy eyes, intoxicated. And this grin, this brazen stare that spells ownership, ninety kilograms of pork on top of the gutted mouse.

I grit my teeth. We're centimeters apart. Murderous loathing on one end, bestial lust on the other. Now, I think. Flex my fingers, not knowing what I'd do, only knowing that it'd be something horrid, painful, something—

Grandma grips me, plants a wet kiss on my cheek. "You forgot about us. Bad girl, *bad* girl. Come, give your grandmother a hug. And who is this?" She pats my belly. "Who is hiding there? Ah? Who is it? Answer baba Valya." She talks in an annoyingly childish voice.

The eaglet jabs at her hand.

"Oy! I felt it! Right there!"

I squirm out. *Let go, you dumb cockroach!*

But the moment is gone.

"Whatcha standing for?" Lyosha snaps. He's squiffed, shaky, acting sober. "Take it off. Show us what you got there." Watches me unzip the coat. The zipper gets stuck. I tug at it, jerk it...then a hand, Pavlik's hand on mine. He blocks Lyosha. "It's okay. You're okay." Whispers. "Relax. I'm with you. You know, he does look like a boar." A question in his eyes. "That old woman, the one that...did you..."

And I think, *I tried telling you. I tried.*

"Yulechka, your slippers." Anton's voice, somewhere close and far. And Yulia's, closer, "There are so many of you, such a big family."

"Family? What family? Pigsty, that's the name for it! Five bitches and them damned animals. I'm the only man here." Lyosha roars at his own joke.

"Swine." Lenchka sticks out a tongue at him.

"Whaddya say, you little whore?"

"Don't call her *whore*." Warns Sonya.

"Watch your mouth." He snaps. "Come here!"

Lenchka hides behind Sonya.

"I'll deal with you later. A man's gotta show them bitches who's boss, eh? Kabansky, Aleksey Ivanovich." He shakes Anton's unresisting hand.

"Baboch, Anton Borisovich." Answers Anton slowly.

I can't stand it anymore, escape to kitchen.

It looks big compared to Pavlik's, ten square meters. Same painted walls, dirty beige. Same rickety table by the wall on the right, no linen, a handful of dishes. Pies, potatoes, more pies. Grandma's work. She's the only one who knows how to cook here. Mama's cooking is atrocious. I walk to the far end of the table, by the window, sit on a stool. The fridge hums to my right, starts, shudders. Tabby Vaska springs from it, hissing, slinks out. I pass my eyes over the gas stove, the laminated

cabinets, edges chipped, the sink full of dirty dishes. So nostalgic, so revolting.

One by one, they trickle in. Pavlik perches next to me, then Yulia and Anton, frigid, guarded. Lenchka in Sonya's lap. Grandma, mama...and Lyosha, across me. I notice something, something I failed to see until now. A change. He's shaven, an unlikely sight. His hair is cropped short. Cropped short. I have a feeling, a suspicion, crane my neck, to look into the corridor. There, amidst the coats, a black jacket and a black beret.

My stomach twists. *A boar turned raven?*

Lyosha stares at me, slaps his thighs, leans forward.

"Irka! Look at me. How did you manage to get pregnant, *dura?*"

An uncomfortable silence.

Off your cock, dickhead. I think.

"How it usually happens," says Pavlik mockingly, "from a stork." I find his hand under the table.

"Stork?" Repeats mama, blank.

Grandma cackles. "From a stork! Oy, Pavlik. You're funny."

Lenchka titters, Sonya shushes her.

"From a stork, huh?" Says Lyosha, not at all amused.

"Yes." Pavlik confirms. "You know, all it has to do is look at a girl, and she gets pregnant."

I hold back a smile.

"Is that what you did, *looked* at her?"

"Excuse me, excuse me a moment—" Anton begins.

"Wait." Mama interrupts him. "I'm talking now." She opens a bottle of Zhigulevskoe, takes a swig. "Irka, you're only sixteen! You could've waited. What were you thinking, you stupid slut? Look at me! If not for your damn papa, I might've had a career, might've had a different life! But no, that animal had to have me day and night." Her lips tremble, she takes another swing.

The silence is unbearable, broken only by chewing noises from the corner by the sink, dogs working on bones.

Thanks, mama, I think, for your frankness.

"What if I don't want to be a grandmother yet, did you think of that? I'm too young to be a grandmother! I have my own life to take care of, so don't you think about dropping off your brat here while you go fuck around with him, don't you dare! What are you looking at me like that for? What do you want me to say, to congratulate you? Is that what you want?" She ogles around, fixates on Pavlik. "You. You stole my daughter from me. You could've at least—"

"My deepest apologies, Marina Viktorovna." Says Pavlik.

"I'm sorry, I simply couldn't resist. Irina stole my heart."

Did I? I think.

The air is growing hotter.

Mama drops her head on Lyosha's shoulder, convulsing.

"You abandoned your mother." He shouts, pats mama's head.

"Left no note for her, no nothing! I searched all over Moscow for you! Then I find you riding around in the metro, like nothing happened, and *blast* me! You slip right through my fingers! She did!" He answers Yulia's questioning face. "Kicked me and ran!"

"If I may—" Starts Anton again.

But Lyosha is not done. "Bitch!" This is thrown in my face. Pavlik squeezes my hand. I hear the water rumble in the kettle on the stove, and I get an idea.

"Oy! The pies. The pies are getting cold." Grandma giggles a little, trying to smooth it over. I suddenly want to squash her like a cockroach.

"Shut up, both of you. Let him speak." Sonya nods at Anton.

"Are you telling me to shut up? In my own house?" Lyosha's face darkens.

"Your house? *Your* house? Listen to him." Sonya scoffs.

"Watch it, *dura*." He says quietly. "Don't mind them dumb women, Anton Borisovich, please, speak. They'll gab your ears off, if you let them."

"Thank you," Anton stands, white as sheet. "I'd like to say a few words, if I may. First of all, please forgive us for the intrusion. It was rude to come uninvited and on such a short

notice. I ask you to be easy on us. Our intent was to meet you to discuss the future of our children, Pavel and Irina. And, well, as this is a special occasion—" he picks up his leather briefcase "—we thought you might like a little token of appreciation for your hospitality."

He unfastens the flap, takes out a couple bottles of Stolichnaya, a box of chocolates. Lenchka reaches for it. Sonya smacks her hand without looking. "Perfume for the ladies." He hands out small glass vials.

"Papa, you've outdone yourself." Exclaims Pavlik.

"French!" Gasps Sonya, sniffing hers. Grandma titters, mama wipes her face, looks at it like she wants to drink it.

Then there is a sizeable tin of caviar to a collective gasp and a tube of German gumballs for Lenchka. She squeals, but Sonya snatches it and shoves it under her thigh. Last, Anton hands Lyosha a steel flask. "For you, Aleksey Ivanovich."

Lyosha croaks in delight. "Now that's what I'm taking about." Opens it, sniffs it, takes a sip. "First class. This is how it's done. A man knows how to do business right. To you, Anton—what was it?"

"Borisovich."

"To Anton Borisovich!" Lyosha takes a gulp, wipes his mouth.

"You're welcome." Says Anton dryly.

"Yes, yes, thank you." Lyosha belches.

"Consider it the ransom for the bride." Anton sits back down. Yulia is still like she's carved from wood. He strokes her interlaced hands. "I propose we talk about our collective future." Beads of sweat glisten on his face. "By *future* I mean, the marriage."

The word settles like sediment.

The kettle boils. Grandma turns off gas.

Should I pour it outright, I think, or make it look like an accident?

I don't care how you do it. Says the eaglet. *Get me my boar. Now.*

Give me a minute, will you?

The eaglet hits my diaphragm. I suppress a gasp. It hurts.

Anton launches into a spiel about the wedding, the restaurant to hold it at, the type of car to rent, the number of guests, the invitations, the food. The cost.

While he talks, everyone begins to eat. The slurping, the chewing, the finger-sucking makes me sick. Pavlik takes one timid bite of a cabbage pie. Yulia sits still, hands folded, politely declining grandma's offers.

"How much can you contribute?" Asks Anton.

Mama's mouth is full of potato. "How much...?"

"How much money can you contribute to the wedding?" He explains patiently.

"Well...how much do you need?"

"Are you out of your mind? What money?" Lyosha roars, lips shiny, a chicken bone in his hand. "To the devil with the wedding! They'll sign the certificate and that's all they need." He throws the bone to the dogs.

"Let me explain something," continues Anton, deceptively quiet. "Irina has been living with us for the last two months without any financial assistance from you. We would certainly appreciate it if—"

"Fuck if we knew where she was!" Lyosha slams a fist on the table. Plates rattle.

"Lyosha, don't." Pleads mama.

"Shut your mouth! The man of the house speaks." He lurches up. The stool falls out from under him with a clatter. "I'm the one feeding you. I'm the only one with a real job. I get paid real money, not like you, *duras*. What do they pay you, huh? Hardly enough for bread?" He leers at grandma.

She shrinks. "Lyosha, sit, sit, eat your pie."

"What do you do in that hospital of yours, empty bedpans?"

I look at the kettle. The handle...cool enough?

"What kind of job do you have, Aleksey Ivanovich, if you don't mind me asking?" Says Yulia.

Lyosha sizes her up, blurts. "Security."

"Oh, that's great news. Irina told us you were looking for a job."

"Did she?"

"That and more." Says Pavlik, sharp. "Irina also told us—"

"Tea!" Grandma exclaims. "Would you like some tea?"

I rise.

"Irka, will make it?"

I will, I think.

"Whatcha looking at?" Lyosha demands. "Teach her manners, that one." He tells Pavlik. "Sly mouse, she is. Playing mute, like she's stupid. I know *stupid*. She ain't stupid, it's all pretense, mark my words, boy. Put her in her place, show her who's the boss. You get what I'm saying?"

I'll show you, I think, walk to the stove, lift the kettle. It's too hot, heavy, and it burns my fingers. I barely notice. I'll show you who's the boss. Grasp it, turn.

"Where you going? Brew it first!" Lyosha cracks up.

You're pig, a pig to be slaughtered. I think. But first, I will boil your dick.

I cross to the table and tip the kettle over. The lid flies off, falls to the floor with bright clatter. Scalding water slops over the rim, out of the spout. My fingers on fire, I lose

the grip and the kettle tumbles into Lyosha's crotch, soaking it through.

His eyes bulge out of their sockets. For a moment he doesn't make a sound, then he squeals like an injured hog, scorched, steaming. Careens and topples off the stool.

The boar.

Lyosha.

It shifts.

I don't want to, slap my face, I don't—

The mouse squeaks. The catfish plops by its side, opens its huge maw, as if it wants to swallow it, as if—

The girl.

I smack my face, hard, but it doesn't—

The herrings vanish. The cockroach bustles around in circles on its bandy legs, aimless, stunned. The viper above it, the wings of the owl. And the butterfly flits to the mouse, to the viper, to the owl, to the mouse again.

The boar roars, its paunch flaming red. Harsh wheezes escape its snout, the stink of half-digested roughage.

The mouse doesn't move, transfixed. It's not the paunch it stares at, it's the thing below. A twisted hunk of flesh, scorched, rubbery, limp. The mouse wants to bite it off. If only the boar didn't twitch, if only it lay still...

Don't. Says the eaglet, somewhere deep.

The mouse. The girl. It's not clear, it's—

Why not?

It'll trample you to death. You got its dick, but you owe me the rest. You need to be alive for that, so scat.

And I do, but before I do, I squish the annoying cockroach with my finger.

Chapter 21. Horse

I sit on a box, resting. I'm sore. Everything hurts, my back, my arms...we've been packing all week. Today we move. To Margarita's apartment. A wedding gift, she said, to start our own family in our own place. A lie. Pavlik told me the real reason. She hasn't been the same since that murder. Dizzy, prone to high blood pressure. Fell on the stairs the other day. Yulia wants her here, to keep an eye on her.

To keep an eye, I think. I've got someone, keeping an eye on me.

The ravens.

They watch me, from every corner, every shadow. Watch us both. Pavlik refuses to admit he got any more death threats, I refuse to believe him. His face is frightened, peaked, dark circles under his eyes. He stacks the last of the books in a box, closes the flaps, plops it on the floor. Boxes, boxes, more boxes, a rolled up rug against the wall, an empty bookcase, an empty dresser. Everything is empty.

The room is gutted, echoey.

"You know, when you tipped the kettle," he fingers his sweater, "I thought, no way. It just slipped out of her hand, it

just...I mean, if it were me, I wouldn't have the guts, Irina. If I came across one of them, say, on the street somewhere, I don't know. I couldn't. Wouldn't be able to hurt him, or say anything. I'd get paralyzed." He lifts his eyes, lost.

I regard him.

"Didn't..." a quick glance at the door, "...the boar make you feel paralyzed?"

Every time, I think. Nod.

"Listen, I'm worried about you. What if he threatens you, when he gets out of the hospital? How much longer can they keep him there? Another week? I doubt it."

A raven croaks behind the window.

I flinch, suddenly angry, cut across my neck with the edge of my palm. *I'll slit his throat with a kitchen knife.* I want to say it aloud, taste it, word for word. They rise and die by my teeth, the words. Dry and broken.

Pavlik shakes his head. "You're not serious, are you?"

I don't move, wound up.

"You're scaring me. Look, I understand how you feel, but you won't stand a chance against him. The man is huge and strong like a hog. I can't be by your side at all times, Irina, I simply can't."

No need, I think. *I'll be fine on my own.*

"Even if I was, it's not like I'd be much help if he decides to attack you. Think about it. He'll squish me like a bug. Like you say...like a butterfly." He says with a sad smile.

I snatch my pad from his desk, write, shove it in his hands. "He may be a big bully, but he's a coward. The second I threaten him with a weapon, he'll shit his pants. My only regret is that I didn't realize it sooner."

"What are you saying?" His face, so naïve, so alarmed.

And for a moment I abhor his fragility, his gayness.

"Fight him." I slap the pad. "Fight them all. The ravens. The eels. Whatever the hell they are, fight them until—"

Several ravens scream at once. And a jackal. Howls. As if answering. I tear to the window, draw the curtain aside. Steely sky boiled with clouds. No sun, only a uniform greyness. And down below, on the naked elm, they sit. Cover it entirely.

I recoil.

"What is it?" Pavlik asks quietly. "What do you see?"

I scribble. "The ravens. About a hundred."

Pavlik peers down. "I see one." He studies me for a tense moment. "You mean, it feels to you like a hundred?"

I grab my head. I want to ram it through the glass, to kill the mouse, to get rid of it, to...this. Every day. It's infuriating. I can't stand it. I can't.

Yes, I can. I must.

I pick up the pad, find the pen under the radiator. And I write. "Something bad will happen today. I feel it. Tell your parents you're sick, invent something, I don't know. A headache, a stomachache, anything."

"Are you sure?"

This question again. He always asks me this question now. Even after...even..."No. I'm not sure. It's only a feeling. A sense. Like with the horsefly, like with the vulture."

A long yowl in the street.

It startles me. "Did you hear that?" I can't write fast enough. "The jackal, just now. It's Shakalov. He's nearby."

"Shakalov is at the theater, prepping it for the season opening. That was a dog, Irina." Says Pavlik carefully.

"I'm not mad! I simply have this..." I nibble on the pen. How can I explain it? "First comes a noise, an animal noise, like a harbinger. Then I see them, the beasts, in the streets, on the roofs, or in the place where it will happen. It's always different. It's—"

A rap on the door.

"Tell them, not today." I add hastily.

"Yes?" Says Pavlik.

Anton peeks in. "Ready?"

"Yeah, I think we are."

I punch the pad in frustration. No use. With the way things happened, with my reputation, it's no use. I can't risk it. Not like he would believe me. Not unless Pavlik manages to sway him.

"Sandwiches are in the kitchen. Help yourselves. I'll go warm up the car." Anton vanishes.

As soon as the door closes, I hurl the pad at the wall. It slides down in a rustle of pages.

Pavlik backs away from me. "You know, sometimes you terrify me."

Sometimes I terrify myself, I think.

"Let's go eat, have some tea. It'll make you feel better." He puts on his theater smile.

And I feel empty. Pregnant, but empty. Barren.

Pavlik also. With them. It always happens, like this. What is the use then, what? Why keep trying? I trail after him into the kitchen, sit down. Watch him fuss, put a plate in front of me, a cup, pour tea, drop in a sugar cube. See his lips move. He rattles, filling the silence, excited. Excited about the move, about living alone, without his parents' constant overbearance.

I don't listen, bite into the sandwich. Chew it. Cold bologna tastes like rubber, bread tastes like dirt. I finish it, wash the plate, stick it in the dryer rack, dress and follow Pavlik outside.

It's biting cold. Heaps of blackened snow line the road. The yard rebounds with the usual Sunday din. Children's calls, shouts, dog barks. Car honks. The elm. I look at the elm. It's bare. I watch for motion, for any movement in the shadows, in open doorways. Nothing.

I stay by the car.

It takes Pavlik and Anton several trips up and down five stories to haul all the boxes into the trunk and in the back seat with barely any room for me. By the time they're done, my toes and fingers are numb.

Less than an hour later we're at Margarita's place, parked between a grubby Moskvich and a new shiny Opel.

I get out and cover my ears. A screech, a rustle, a scraping of talons. *They're here, I think. Hidden. Waiting.*

Yell at them, says the eaglet. Drive them into the open.

I can't. I think. And don't you try kicking me again.

I will. A strike, right on my diaphragm.

I gasp for breath. *Is that the way of it now?*

It is, until you feed me. Says the eaglet. I'm hungry.

"See? Everything is fine." Says Pavlik.

I jump from surprise.

"I don't know what you were worried about." His eyes sparkle, so black in the cold. Warm breath breaks through his lips. He gestures at the empty yard, broken swings, snowed in

benches. A bum wobbles along the sidewalk, gaunt, emaciated. An earflap hat covers half of his bony face, his pants are tied with a rope, stretched out at the knees, a quilted jacket thrown over his naked shoulders.

A horse, I think, a homeless downtrodden horse. And suddenly I know. They will maul it.

"Pavlusha! Come here. You take this." Says Anton. "I'll get the TV." They drag heavy boxes out of the trunk.

I have an impulse, an urge to yank on Pavlik's arm, to point out the bum to him, to write, to explain. Then it's gone. No matter. He won't pay attention. None of them will. Then how can I...?

All right, eaglet. I think. I know.

Do you?

Watch me.

I spin on my heel and march to the entranceway.

"Irina, wait!"

They catch up to me on the seventh floor landing. I stand by Margarita's door, listening.

"Why didn't you wait for us?"

"Irina, please go back to the car. We can't leave it unattended." Anton is irritated.

The door opens. I rush past Margarita, past Yulia, straight to the kitchen. This is it. Any minute now, any minute. I'll be

late...I'll be. Where does she put them? I jerk open drawer after drawer, rummage inside.

Voices behind me.

"You left the car unattended?" Yulia is scandalized.

"You'll strain your back like this, Pavlusha!" Margarita.

"I got this, I got this." A groan, and—

I scream.

An animal cry. Not of a wound, but of mortal terror. It takes me by surprise, what they do. The cowardly nature of it, the pettiness. The clamor overwhelms me. Breaking glass, snapping bones. Outlines, silhouettes. Ravens pecking at the horse. They fell it. It's bleeding red on white snow.

I'll be late! My heart is jumping out of my chest.

"Irina!" Pavlik is in the kitchen. "What are you..."

I close my mouth with an audible click. *You wait and see. I'm coming to get you, bastards.* I find what I'm looking for in the top drawer by the stove. A big steak knife, blade worn, wooden handle polished with use. I snatch it, push past Pavlik, past all of them, gathered in the doorway, to the landing, down the stairs, and out into the street. Arm outstretched, I sprint across the road, to Anton's Lada.

Late.

I pant, clasp my belly. *Go ahead, eaglet. Say it.*

No answer.

Running footsteps.

"Oh God." Pavlik beside me, pries my fingers off the knife. No need for it now. I let him.

The Opel is gone. In its place lies the bum, face up, no hat, no jacket. Blood runs from his large fleshy nose, drips on the snow. Swarthy skin, features coarse, exaggerated, and his hair, black, curly, touched with grey.

Ethnic cleansing at its finest, I think, let's butcher a weak homeless Jew to show our might. Russia for the Russians, is that what you ravens chant? Fury grips me. I look for a note. They must have left it, they must have.

Anton rudely pushes me aside. "My car! My car!"

It's destroyed. Windows are jagged holes. Tires are slashed. The trunk gapes open, its lock gouged out like an eye. Everything has been taken, the VCR, the computer, the radio and cassette tower with both speakers. Clothes, books. Gone.

"Damn hooligans." Margarita spits. "I'm calling militia."

"Don't waste your breath, grandma." Says Pavlik, subdued, shocked. "Better call the ambulance. Tell them a man has been injured." He squats next to the bum, shakes him. And I see it, something white sticking out of his pant pocket, pull it out.

Same paper, same handwriting.

PAVEL BABOCH, PANSY JEW. A TASTE OF WHAT'S COMING.

I hand it to Pavlik. Our eyes meet. His pupils are wide, filled with terror, the kind animals get when caught in headlights, blank, consuming.

You believe me now? I think.

"What's this, son?" Anton takes the note.

A purge message. I want to answer. Russia or death.

Then the noise starts.

Muffled whispering. Speculations of the growing crowd, theories over what might have happened, why, who did it, how. The cost of replacing the windows, the tires, who's to blame for the crime rate increase in the country. The whine of the ambulance. The medics, the stretcher. An army-green Kamaz truck towing the Lada. People, faces, chaos. I want to lie down, to close my eyes, to escape. To forget, to not care.

Hold Pavlik's hand. Up the stairs, they lead us. Back to Margarita's apartment, where it's warm, where...I can try one more thing. I trace it on Pavlik's palm. *Sim.*

He studies me. We can't talk, not with so many people around. "Sim?" He mouths to me.

Who else? I think. Who else will you listen to?

He nods, no words, nothing. Just nods.

The doorbell chimes. Militia is here.

"Did you scream because you..."

I shrug. What does it matter now?

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

I get it. I think. I'm having a hard time believing myself.

Chapter 22. Ravens

Today, I think, it will happen today. I run after Pavlik, up the steps of the underpass. It's a quarter past nine. We slept in, exhausted by the investigation, by the questioning deep into night, and now we're late. It took us an hour to get to Teatralnaya station from Margarita's apartment. An hour. Sweat trickles down my face. I lick it off. Warm, salty. We sprint along the sidewalk, dodge pedestrians, halt by the crossing.

I stoop, wheeze. It's hard for me to run. The breasts, the belly, getting heavy. The light turns green. The traffic doesn't move. We have to weave our way between the cars.

"Look!" Pavlik points. "Pensioners on the promenade."

I turn my head.

A rally marches about a hundred meters up the street. A shrill voice, distorted by the megaphone, gives whiny feedback.

"For Motherland!" It cries.

"For Stalin!"

"For government's resignation!"

"Death to capitalism!"

"Off with unemployment!"

Signs with slogans. Pennants. Soviet flags. A pair of retired women hold up a huge red banner with semi-profiles of Stalin and Lenin, cheek to cheek, like newlyweds gazing into their bright proletariat future.

Fucking communist party supporters, I think. Chickens, too dumb to think. Lets resurrect the dead, see if they can fix my life. Save me from poverty and impotence, because I'm too lazy to do jack-shit on my own. Distracted, I stumble on the curb. Pavlik catches me. We break out of the tide, skip along the street, into the archway, to the theater's back door.

"Who is it?"

"Ilinichna, it's us!" Cries Pavlik.

She labors out of the booth. "Pavlik? Irina? You scared the devil out of me. Quick! He's waiting."

"I know." Pavlik pants. "How long?"

"About an hour now. Furious." She grins at me, from behind her oversized glasses, pats my belly. "Well, look at you! Congratulations! Did you hear?" This is added in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Please, not right now." Pavlik pulls on my hand.

"Shakalov got sacked." She announces.

"What?" Pavlik gasps. "When?"

"This morning. Well, enough of this. I'll tell you more later. Go! You'll anger him more." She waves us to the stairs.

I beam. Shakalov is gone! Skid down the steps, feeling at home. This place, the theater, Ilinichna with her brisk touch, the cookies she fed me, the tea. Actor posters on the walls. And the smell, the velvet, the perfume, the dust.

I missed you, chamber theater, I think.

We enter the auditorium. Vast, dark, hushed. The curtains are drawn. Lights are turned off, except for a handful of projectors over the stage. In the front row sits a hunched figure, the theater director. A golden scarf about his neck, hands interlaced. He doesn't raise his head as we approach, doesn't indicate he heard us, eyes cast down.

"You're late." He says to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Sim. We—"

"Pavlik, my child." He looks up, eyes tired, his whole face somehow sunken. None of his usual flamboyance, only weariness and fatigue. "When did I tell you to be here?"

"At nine A.M, but—"

"And what time is it now?"

"Sim, listen—"

"Silence! Answer me. When did it start?"

"When did what start?" Pavlik blinks.

"The death threats."

"There was only one, the one that—"

"Don't lie to me. When did you get the first note?"

Silence. I watch the dust dance in the light. A mixture of pity and triumph in my stomach. He'll listen to Sim, he'll listen.

"Do you want to get shot?"

Pavlik flinches.

"I'm asking you again." He says. "When did you get the first note?"

"In December. The day you dropped us off..."

"What did it say?"

"Something about Kostya forgetting to tell me—"

"You're next, Jewish homo."

"How did you know?" Pavlik's face falls.

"They send me those on every holiday. I get particularly nasty ones on my birthday, promising to rip my ass in two. They're not very elaborate, rather primitive and to the point. Did you know about this, Irina?" His stare burns me.

I want to slip through the floor.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Look, Sim. We didn't want to bother you—"

"Bother me? *Bother* me?" His face darkens. "Do you understand what this means? Murder, Pavlik. *Mur-der*."

"I know, I'm not an idiot! And stop talking to me like I'm a child!" Pavlik's voice bounds to the ceiling, shrill, upset.

"You are a child. Sit."

He drops on the seat, arms crossed, fuming.

I perch on the edge, tense. That feeling I had, in the underpass, the precognition, is back. *Today, they will strike today. But where, how?* It's muddy, the sense, the trace of it. Slippery. I can't quite catch it, can't...hear scratches. Claws of a dog on wooden boards. A jackal? I twist around, scan the darkness. Nothing.

"What do you suggest I do?" Pavlik, calmer now.

"Smile. Always smile. Keep performing. You're an actor. You've been given wings, you can't give up now."

"How?" Pavlik breaks down. "How can I perform when I can't even be myself? When can't even tell my own father—" He covers his face.

"Tell what?" Prods Sim.

"You know what." Muffled, through fingers.

"I want to hear you say it."

Pavlik shakes his head.

"What are you afraid of?" Asks Sim.

"Of being harassed." He whispers. "Beaten. Killed."

I slip my hand into his. He holds it.

"Listen to me. I understand how you feel. You think I'm not afraid? I am afraid, very much so. We all are. It's okay to be afraid, Pavlik, but it's not okay to let the fear stop you. That's what they want, for you to tuck your tail and to stay

quiet. What would happen if we all did that? Your art is a way to flip a finger to the ugliness of this country, this animal savage place we've been born into. Remember that. Everything in you has a right to live, to be free, to be beautiful. Let it out, before you forget you have it." Sim lifts Pavlik's face. "Listen to me. I want you to *lis-ten* carefully. The moment you stop creating, you die. Not when you're killed. When you're killed, only your body is gone, your art will live on."

"What is it to you, Sim? What is my life to you? Why do you care?" Pavlik's voice catches, his eyes well up with water.

"Come here." He pulls him close. Pavlik buries his face in the folds of the scarf. His shoulders shake. Sim strokes his head, fatherly almost. "Shhh. Cry it out, crying is good for you. I miss Kostya too. I miss him dearly."

Movement catches my eye, by the curtain. Something stirs in the shadow, an eddying swarm of—

Horseflies. I spring up. The cushioned seat behind me folds with a soft thud. The knowledge, all around me, the knowledge. *Here. It will happen here. Why did I tell Pavlik to see Sim? Why?* I shrink from guilt. Guilt and shame and regret. And horror. Awful horror. It slides inside my stomach. My face is hot, my mouth dry. I grope inside the sleeve of my coat, take out the bundle, unwrap. *Yes, it's my fault, but you won't catch me unaware.*

Pavlik's hand on my arm. "They're coming? Here?"

I nod.

"Oh shit." He swears. "Now?"

"Is that a kitchen knife?" Says Sim.

I edge back, mount the steps to the stage. Survey the hall, straining to hear any noise, any disturbance. My heart thumps in my mouth, tasting metallic. Darkness solidifies, impatient, hungry. *We're trapped*, I realize. *The theater is closed for mid-season break, so there is only us and Ilinichna. They'll intercept us, if we try to get out. I bet Shakalov still has all the keys.*

Pavlik is frantic. "Sim, we need to get out of here."

"Why? What is going on? Irina, get off the stage and give me that knife before you poke your eye out."

"Irina can sense things, before they happen. First she hears a noise, an animal noise, then—"

"Sense things? What things?"

"Please, there's no time!" Pavlik cries. "The Nationalists, they're coming, Sim! They'll be here any minute!"

"Is that true, Irina?" Sim measures me with a heavy look.

"Is that true, what Pavlik is saying?"

I don't respond. I'm gone. Dread spreads over me. They're here, I hear them. The rustling wings, the scraping claws. Twenty ravens and a jackal. *Come here then, bastards*, I think,

come and show me your real faces. My belly fills with lead, tugs down. Movement there, faint kicking.

Eaglet?

"They're here." Says Pavlik.

Running footsteps reverberate along the halls.

Eaglet, talk to me.

Silence.

They're coming, eaglet! The ravens!

Nothing an eagle can't kill, says the eaglet.

I'm not an eagle!

You're not a mouse either, retorts the eaglet.

Who am I then?

Who do you want to be?

They enter through the doorway. A pack of young guys in black coats, black caps, black gloves, Shakalov in the lead.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my theater?" Bellows Sim. "Get out!" Then he sees him. "Ah, Vladimir Kuzmich. I thought I asked you to vacate the premises this morning?"

Shakalov doesn't answer. He looks scared, beaten, avoids Sim's gaze. "Come on, boys, do them. Quick."

"What's all this about?" Asks Sim calmly.

"Don't listen to him, do them!"

"Do us?" Sim chuckles. "What is this, a farce? Twenty boys against an old man and two children? Are we that dangerous,

Vladimir Kuzmich? Look at you, you're scared. You know why you're scared? Because you're a slut. I hate sluts." He smiles.

Shakalov shouts. "Whatcha waiting for? I said, do them!"

It happens very fast.

We're swarmed with bodies. An arm flies up. A truncheon, the one used by militia. A blunt whack. Sim topples to the floor, takes the hitter with him. Pavlik gets wrangled, pinned to the wall. "Irina, run!" He yells.

I'm not going anywhere, I think. I'm done running. I bound off the stage and charge. Somebody sticks out a foot. I sprawl, the knife flies out of my hand. Arms catch me mid-fall, position me in front of Pavlik.

"Don't touch her! She's pregnant, you morons, let her go!"

"Pregnant with a Jewish freak." Says someone. "From a Jewish faggot!" A jitter of laughter.

"Watch, whore." Shakalov's breath on my neck.

Arms work on Pavlik like pistons, with sounds of flat impact. His face changes. His expression...his eyes, open wider. The fear in them, the submission is gone. "Vladimir Kuzmich!" He screams. "Does it excite you to watch a bunch of guys beat up a fairy?"

"Shut him up!" Shakalov spits.

Pavlik laughs. It's scary, his laughter, empty. "Is that what you're afraid of? My words? I'll give you more." His arms

rise. His fists. He fights back, clumsily, uneven. Hooks a man, sends him flying. Clips another. "Are you a voyeur, Vladimir Kuzmich?" His voice turns hysterical. "Do you get hard watching men fuck?" His punches grow weaker under blows. "You guys like hitting me? Go ahead, hit me more, I'll moan for you." A gloved hand swipes at his mouth. He spits blood. "You don't get laid much, do you?" The breath gets knocked out of him. He doubles over, raises his face. Swollen, lips split, nose broken. "I get it...girls won't have you. That's why you want me so bad...that's why—" A blow cuts him off.

"A lesson for you, for fucking Jewish scum." Shakalov's breath in my ear. "How did he do it, tell me. Wank off in a napkin and stick it up your cunt?" His hand, on my ass. "Or did he make you suck it out of Sim's asshole?"

I flicker. The girl. The mouse. The ravens peck a butterfly. The men kill Pavlik. The ravens. The men. His face. He lifts it one more time. Bloody, disfigured. "Irina...sorry...I love you..." A kick. He slumps to the floor.

I move my lips. I want. Want to tell him, want him to hear me, want—

"Looks like your lover boy has finally taken the hint." Shakalov feels me about.

Rage grips me. Blind, overwhelming. *I hope you die, you petty chauvinistic shit.* I buck, ram my heel into his crotch. He

gasps, lets go. I spot the knife a meter away, under a seat, lunge for it, swirl around and stab him. Miss. Two guys rush at me. I snarl, brandish the blade around. They start back, surprised.

"Bitch!" Wheezes Shakalov. "Put that away, before I carve your face!"

I advance. No fear, no mouse. Push forth with my belly, dare them. *Go on, hit me! Hit me!* The words, the words on my tongue, by my teeth, so close. They want to spill. They want. Almost speech. A string of unintelligible noises breaks through. Like a screech of an eagle trying to talk.

"She's mad!" Shouts a voice.

"Finish her." Says Shakalov.

"But, Vladimir Kuzmich, she's pregnant."

They eye my belly.

"I said, finish her, dumbass!"

I lunge at Shakalov.

He catches my wrist, twists it. The knife drops. Then something hits my head, and I fall.

Chapter 23. Cows

I dream about having my baby. The doctor pulls something warm from between my legs, hands it to me. A squirmy squealing thing sticky with gore. Large ugly head, hirsute body. A boar with a sinewy cock. Its piggy eyes on me. It sniffs me, latches onto my breast. I scream and drop it. Wake up, screaming, on a bed in a brightly lit room filled with hospital smell. Medicine, wet mopping cloth, ammonia. A hand pats me. A nurse. Round-faced, impervious. Fat stupid goose.

I jerk up.

"Lie still." She pushes me back.

The theater, the beating. Pavlik! I attempt to sit up.

"So stubborn. I said, lie still! You'll make it worse for the brat. Here, let me..." She lifts me by the armpits, fluffs the pillow behind me. "Better?"

I moan. Every muscle hurts, every bone is glass, brittle. My head is stuffed with cotton, my throat is parched. I try to swallow and I can't. Something prickles my arm. An IV is hooked to my vein. I shift. Feet it, hear it. Between my feet, a warm gurgling plastic bag, a catheter snakes along my leg.

"Measure your temperature." She hands me a thermometer, departs to the next bed. "Larisa, wake up. Temperature."

"What's the hurry, Lida?" Larisa mumbles. "I'm sleeping. Just write it's normal."

"If you want to complain, go and complain to Nikita Matveich, not to me. I spit on your temperature. Understand? Take it."

Larisa grumbles.

I crane my neck to see.

The room is small and narrow. Four beds, two on either side. Vomit-beige walls, sweaty window. Curtains are stamped with dull brown flowers. Flowers everywhere, on the oilcloth floor, on the bedding, on the towels, on the robes. And women, huge pregnant women, like swollen cows in dead flowers.

Larisa is in her thirties. Big round belly, large doleful eyes, freckled skin, legs wrapped in elastic bandage. She shakes out the thermometer. The bedsprings whine in protest. "I took it yesterday and it was just fine. Why the devil do I need to measure it every day? Tell me, Galya." She addresses the girl on the bed across.

The nurse slams the door.

I flinch, the women act like it's normal.

"What do I know? I'm not a doctor." Galya is young, bony, barely twenty. Eyes suspicious, oily hair pulled into a

ponytail. She's wrapped in a pink robe with daisies, feet in home-knit woolen socks. "Hey! New girl. What's your name?"

What do you care? I think.

She walks over and plops on my bed. "I'm Galya. This here is Larisa. She's having twins. Isn't she huge? And that's Natasha over there. She's due any day."

"Thank God it's not triplets." Larisa snorts. "Egor would've killed me."

Natasha says nothing. She has a broad pimply face, callous, the type that doesn't smile lightly.

They all study me.

"Why are you quiet?" Asks Galya.

You want my life story? I think. I'll give it to you. By the time I'm done, you'll be puking your guts.

"Maybe she's deaf?" Asks Larisa.

"I don't know. She's not saying anything." Shrugs Galya.

"Can you talk?"

I go through my usual pantomime. It hurts.

"You're mute?"

Do you need me to punch you so you'd get it?

"But you can hear me? That's weird. Why are you mute?"

If you won't shut up, I think, I'll strip you off this heinous robe and stuff it down your throat. My head pounds, my

stomach cramps. Sour taste in my mouth. *Pavlik*, I think, *what did they do to you, Pavlik?*

"How far along are you?" Asks Galya. "You look awfully small."

I show her six fingers. *Will you buzz off now?*

"I thought so." Galya says with authority.

"Why the devil did they put her in here?" Snaps Larisa.

"This is the gynecology. They should've put her in obstetrics."

"The clinic is full, that's why." Drawls Natasha. "Leave her alone. Can't you see she's in pain?"

They quarrel.

I hear them, don't hear them. Doze off.

Come to in the evening.

Natasha is gone. The stained mattress on her bed is stripped. Larisa snores. Helpful Galya hops over. "You missed the doctor. He said he'll keep you for a while, to prevent preterm labor. What did you do, fall down the stairs or what?"

Yeah, something like that, I think. *Fell out the wrong pair of legs*. I turn away, as much as the IV permits.

"Don't want to talk to me? Fine. Have it your way." Says Galya bitterly, retreats back to her bed. "I'm not planning to stay at your side, retelling you every bit of news. Just so you know."

I chip the paint off the wall, sullen. *Hospital, again.* My stomach is a hard rock. I can't get up, can't call anyone to find out about Pavlik, can't escape. My baby is in danger of premature birth.

Eaglet, I think. Eaglet, can you hear me?

Silence. No movement, not a stir. I'm carrying a stone.

Eaglet, please, talk to me. I peel off a flake of paint, hook my nail under the edge of another.

Eaglet, I think. Say something.

Nothing.

Please.

Tears roll, pool on the pillow, soak it.

I drift to sleep.

Wake up the next day to the merciless shine of fluorescent lamps. Lida doles out thermometers. Larisa and Galya chat over porridge. A new girl occupies Natasha's bed. She's my age, ugly, lopsided, swathed in a bright violet robe mottled with kitschy orange flowers.

I avert my eyes, glad I'm in the standard hospital issue gown, washed out and colorless. Prop myself up. The needle in the vein hurts like an old bruise. The IV bottle is empty. A plate of buckwheat kasha, a glass of tea, and a plastic bag sit on my nightstand. I lift the bag. It crinkles.

Larisa and Galya pause their chatter.

Mandarins, I think, a whole kilogram of mandarins. A folded note underneath says, "Irina Myshko, 8th floor, room 714."

I unfold it.

"Dear Irina! I'm very worried about you. The doctor said you need rest, so no visits are allowed. Pavlusha is in critical care with two broken ribs, bruised lungs, and a concussion. Sim is at home, feeling better. He sends his greetings. It's very cold outside. It takes me two hours to cross the city from Pavlusha's hospital to yours. How are you feeling? I hope the baby is okay. Please, write. Yulia."

I read it again and again. My fingers betray me. The note slips out and floats to the floor.

"Bad news?" Asks Galya.

I look up, unseeing.

She hands me the paper. "You have no face on you. Want something to write with?"

I taste salt on my lips, wipe it.

Galya comes back with a page torn out from a lined school notebook and a pencil. "Here."

I breathe, steady my hand. "Dear Yulia! I'm feeling fine, the baby is fine. I'm very worried about Pavlik. Please tell him I love him. Irina." Can't write anymore, lie down.

"Is Pavlik your husband?" Asks Galya.

I don't move.

"She's got no band, you *dura*," says Larisa.

They tell me I'm due for magnesium shots in an hour, to relax my abdomen muscles. They say it hurts like a motherfucker and I won't be able to sit for hours. I get the shots, wait for the nurse to leave, and, gritting my teeth, triumphantly sit up, to prove them wrong.

They leave me in the space of three days. First goes Larisa, in the middle of the night, cursing Egor at every contraction, then Galya, the next morning, then Yana, the new girl, crying and complaining loudly, all of them to the delivery ward on the floor below. They send me folded notes with babies' names, weights, heights, labor stories, well wishes and phone numbers. New women come and go.

I stay. For two months.

Trapped, a bird in a cage, cows around me, whisked away to delivery. My days are filled with groans, shots, tests, gynecological examinations. After two weeks I'm able to stand on my own and wobble to the toilet to empty my pissbag. Another week, and I can walk to the cafeteria, envious of women by the pay phones. Painted mouths, bits of conversations, smiles. Giggles. Voices. Talking voices.

My name is Irina Myshko, I think, I'm mute. The mouse, the eagle...that's all rubbish. I'm just a dumb mute dura. Never talked, never will.

The eaglet doesn't answer me anymore. I exist through written notes from Yulia about Pavlik's improvement and through nightly trips to the roof, to gaze up, at the sky, and to gaze down, from the height of eight floors.

It's all I have. All that's mine. Mine to take, if I decide to. Every night I wait for the clinic to grow quiet, to fall asleep. Throw on my coat, step into hospital slippers, and creep out of the room. Hear nurses chat at the nurse station, hear the echo of their laughter, sneak by the elevators, labor up the rickety service ladder, push open the trapdoor. It's never locked. Why would one us bloated cows want to get on the roof?

It's spring now. March.

I clamber onto scratchy bitumen, legs wide apart for balance, right myself. The snow has mostly melted. It's cold. Wind whips my hair, freezes my face. Black sky flickers with stars. I wrap the coat around me tighter, a lone figure in the monotone carpet of roofs, dark and grim.

Rare cars crawl along the street, in weak yellow streetlight. A blaring militia Zhiguli speeds by.

Eaglet?

Silence. Vast brooding silence, the sound of absence.

I'm an outcast, eaglet. I'm defective.

No answer. No stir.

I don't know who I am anymore, and I don't think I care.
Wind urges me, prods me. *There is nothing left of me, eaglet.*
Nothing. I'm sorry I failed you.

I wait.

Then I hit my stomach. With my knuckles, painfully, hard. I
hit it until my hands hurt. *I can't live like this! I just*
can't! Do you understand? I wait for an answer, something,
anything.

There is only the hum of the wind.

I can't, eaglet. I'm sorry.

I walk to the edge of the roof, to the wide low parapet. It
comes up to my shins. I step on it. The parking lot below is
dimly lit, mostly empty. A lone truck, a few ambulance vans. All
I have to do is lean and fall.

Lean.

And fall.

Chapter 24. Mosquitos

I stand in the wind. I wonder. Is eight floors high enough to guarantee death? Will the impact kill both the baby and I, or will one of us live on, with terrible injuries and deformities? Cursing life? Cursing everything, everyone? What if...what if something else. What if I grow wings and fly, like an eagle. Is it worth a try?

"Hey! Whatcha doing up there?"

I give a start.

A medic, by the ambulance van. A nuisance, a pest. An annoying mosquito.

Leave me be! I want to shout. *What's it to you?*

"Have you lost your mind?" He yells, hands to his mouth.

"Get down, *dura!* Get down!"

I step back, slip on black ice. Sit down, hard. Cry out. By the time I pull myself upright, he's here. Climbs out of the trapdoor. "Hey! Wait!"

I run, one hand on my belly, another on my breasts. They jiggle, heavy. I almost fall, right myself, reach the opposite edge of the roof. There's nowhere else to go. *That's it*, I

think, *they'll put me in the nuthouse now.* I lean on the wall of the elevator housing and wait.

Then he's on me, scared out of his mind. Smoke breath. Carping words in my ear, reproaches, rebukes. Strong hands. Unceremonious. He leads me to the trapdoor. Helps me down, into another pair of hands. Corny and harsh. Another ambulance medic, or maybe a driver. I don't look, don't want to look. They both scold me, terrified and relieved. I blunder through the corridor, one foot in front of another. Too fatigued to respond to anything. To anyone. Nurses, doctors. Patients.

Like mosquitoes around me, a cloud of mosquitoes.

They question me, poke me, sting me. Get me in bed. Someone pulls my eyelids apart, forces open my mouth, makes me swallow pills. Someone puts a hot-water bottle on my belly. Someone covers me with a blanket. Whispers rustle. Worries, concerns.

I relax, warm up and drift off.

Into a dream. Into a nightmare.

A frenzy.

The mouse, covered with mosquitoes.

The girl, suffocating under too many blankets.

No, the mouse, gutted, shiny intestines spilled on soaked sheets. Bloody. Sticky. The eaglet is gone, taken, cut out. By whom? By the doctor? By the boar?

By the ravens?

The mosquitoes gorge with blood, suck it in. More land on me, inject me with thinning saliva.

I'm hot, sweaty, and feverish.

"Temperature forty one and rising." A voice. "If it doesn't drop in an hour or so..."

Cold wet towel on my face. I throw it off, throw off the blankets.

The girl. The mouse. Mutated, with two newborn wings. It tries to flap them, to fly, plummets down. Some beast picks it up, puts it back to bed, covers it. Her. Me. Irina Myshko. Swarmed with mosquitoes, a droning coat. They alight on my face, on my stomach, their proboscises search for my womb. The tender flesh inside. Small eyes, glossy wings. Clear twitchy abdomens. A nuisance, blood eating parasites. Feeding on me. Then come the horseflies. The woodpeckers. Sharp bills, beady eyes. They poke at the mouse, at the girl, at the belly. The ravens now. The vultures.

Lights turn on.

Faces, bodies, bustle, chaos.

Lenin comes in, sits on my bed, asks me about my purpose in life. My goal. "What are you going to do with the rest of it, citizen Myshko? Are you deaf? Do you listen?" Karl Marx behind him. Stalin. They commiserate in a cold dispassionate way. Wish me a speedy recovery. Line by the window, all three of them,

chant some communist party tune, some Soviet song composed to doggerel poems. A howl mixes in. The jackal. A chorus of jackals. Tongues out, they surround me, want to strip me. Lick me, eat the salt of my sweat.

Moles drop on me from the ceiling, a rain of soft meat lumps, wrapped in skin. Jackals catch them, crunch them.

I bend over the edge of the bed and throw up.

Someone wipes it, someone, something. Slurps up my vomit. The tapeworm, hanging from the dissected belly of a woman. Katya? Kira? I forgot. Not a woman, a cow. Its udder gapes open, distended, empty womb, bowels tip out in loose coils. A bloody mess. A mess of bowels, of tendons, of—

I retch. My heart drums. Sweat drips off my face.

Hospital walls disintegrate. Paint peels off in hunks. The cement crumbles. The floor fills with swampy water. It stinks of mold and septic reek. A perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes. Animals slosh through it, advance. Hordes of them. They're all here. Eels snake to my feet, vipers, rats. Catfish, herrings, salamanders...

The cacophony they produce.

I shriek. A hand covers my mouth. I bite it, kick it, thrash. Arms pin me down. A needle bites into my vein, hot liquid bores through my arm, to my heart. The edges of my vision go blurry, curl and bubble. Break.

Solid darkness.

A tiny spot of light. Far off. Twenty meters, maybe more. It glows, eerie, in the middle of a field. Fresh fallow. The smell of damp overturned earth fills my nostrils. Wet, soft. Crumbly. I fall to my knees and crawl. What is it? Something white, luminescent. Swaddled in—

A baby, I think, a newborn baby. A boy. My boy.

He opens his eyes. Brown and sad.

"I'm dying." He says.

"No!" I say. And I hear myself talk. I hear myself talk.

"You can't die. You haven't been born!"

"I'm sorry." Says the boy.

"You can't leave me." I say. Touch his cheek, so smooth, so warm. Tears run down my face. I don't care to wipe them.

"Please, don't go. I don't have anyone else. How will I live without you?"

"I don't know." Says the boy. "Live the best you can, I guess." He sighs. "I don't have much time. Thought I'd say goodbye. Thought I'd ask for something...special. Can you hold me?"

I weep, pick him up, so light, so fragile, press him to my breast, rock him a little. "Why," I whisper, "why are you leaving me? What have I done wrong?"

"Nothing," says the boy, "I'll be going."

The light goes out of him.

"Irina Myshko." Says a voice. "You have visitors."

A hand on my shoulder.

I stir. Wade through layers of gauze, of fog. Sit up, confused, groggy. The dream is leaving me, fast. I snatch at its bits, the tails of its thoughts, its breath. It disintegrates into nothing.

A bad feeling, bad taste in my mouth.

Something awful has happened.

Eaglet? I think. *Eaglet, answer me.*

A rock in my hands, a dead rock wrapped in skin.

Eaglet! Horror floods me. *Eaglet!*

There are coughs.

They stand around me, a living tableau. The butterfly, a black admiral. The viper, the owl. The catfish, two herrings. The cockroach. The seal in a checkered scarf.

But no boar.

Your dick is still hurting? I think, suddenly livid. *Good. I hope it does. I hope it burns like a skinned puppy dipped in pure surgical spirit.*

They study me. Pairs of eyes, red-rimmed, frayed at the edges, questioning. Furtive. Hiding the lie they're about to feed me. I sense it. Did they cry? Did they pretend to cry? Fury in me, fury and mortal terror.

Eaglet! Are you alive?

No air enters my lungs, no oxygen.

Eaglet...

They shuffle closer. About to foist me their unsolicited mercy, to make me feel better. As if. Nothing can revive my boy. I destroyed him, like I wanted to, from the very beginning.

Fuck you! Fuck you all! Leave me. I want to die. I turn to the wall.

Someone sits me up. I'm too weak to fight. Blink at bright lights. Cheap curtains with flowers that resemble dead spiders. Stuffy air. Figures around me. Not beasts, people.

Pavlik. So close, a touch away. He has lost weight. His face is pallid, bluish almost. Posture somehow broken.

"Hey." He says.

I want to be with him, and I don't want to. It's been two months, but it feels like two years. Too long. I don't feel him. Don't recognize him.

"How are you?"

I don't respond.

"I got out last week." He takes my hand. "You ready to go home?"

I don't have a home, I think. I have nothing. Want to lie down.

He wouldn't let me. "Irina, please."

They all stand there, look at us. Even mama. I can't bear it, I can't. The sham. The pretense. Reach under the pillow. There. Galya's notebook and pencil. Hold them. Write words, final words. "I can't lie anymore, Pavlik."

He stares. "What are you saying?"

"I will tell them—"

"No." He stops my hand. Whispers. "After the wedding. Please. I've been thinking this over."

"There will be no wedding." The pencil doesn't want to behave, slips out of my fingers. "Don't worry. I'll fix this. You won't have to endure me much longer."

"What are you *talking* about?"

New page. Clean. Virgin.

Can you hold this? I think. *Can you hold this dirt, paper?*

I write. "Lyosha Kabansky raped me every night, for a year. The baby is his. He doesn't know it. I ran away from home to escape him." The page shrinks under my words.

I destroyed you, eaglet, I think. I deserve to be destroyed. I never told you this. I should have. I love you.

I tear out the page.

Hand it to mama.

Chapter 25. Spider

I wait for mama to finish reading, snatch the note out of her hand. Thrust it at Yulia. *Here, I think, read this.* Force it on them, one by one. *Know this. This is what happened. This.* I want to scream. *Do you believe me? You don't believe me? I don't give a shit if you believe me or not. Not anymore.* They gape at me, shocked, confounded. Faces doubtful. Reproachful.

Hypocrites, I think. It's not me who's crazy. You are. Look at you, pests in a circus. Animals. Cowards.

Then, mama. That fake joy she wanted to give me, it peels off her, the mask. Slides down. And underneath it, slimy catfish, not quite drunk, not quite sober. She fixes me with jealous eyes. "Bitch." She spits. "I knew it, I just knew it. I tell you. If the bitch doesn't want it, the dog won't jump."

The boar, I think, you mean, the boar. The boar will fuck you, mama, want it or not.

Her face contorts with hatred.

A lump in my throat. *Curtains, I think. Orange curtains.*

Dua, says the eaglet.

Eaglet! My legs buckle.

Dua.

Eaglet! I thought you—

Dua, he repeats.

Stop, I think. Please, stop!

Dua, dua, dua!

"Dura." Says mama with relish. She stares at me with that familiar glee that comes right before beating. "I'll show you how to whore yourself with my man. Show you." She raises her arm. Her right arm. Flesh hangs off it, flabby. I can see it through her blouse.

Orange.

I hate orange.

I push her and bolt. Stumble, pick myself up.

Where? Somewhere. Anywhere. I don't know, don't care. I'm dizzy, bump into people. My legs tremble. I force myself. I have to. Get out, never see that face, never hear that voice. Hobble along the hallway, hold on to the wall, stagger into the elevator. People look at me strange, ask me what's wrong. I get out. Out. Into the melting snow of the parking lot.

My belly cramps.

I grab onto a tree. Thin, short and young. It grows on a patch of dirt. A rowan. Clumps of last year's berries in my face, shriveled, blackened. I pluck one, bite it. Dry like a bone and bitter. It calms me. I eat a few more. Chew, swallow.

They taste like dust. I watch my breath curl in the morning air, smell spring, take in a lungful.

Eaglet?

Silence.

Eaglet, please.

Faint movement.

And relief. Relief floods me. I hold on to the tree, afraid I'll fall. *Why?* I think. *Why did you do this?*

To scare you, says the eaglet. To make you remember.

I clasp my belly. *You did. You scared me to death. Please don't do this again.*

I won't, if you hold your promise, warns the eaglet.

"Irina!" Pavlik runs across the lot. He pants, brushes hair out of his face. Flushed from running.

I clasp the tree tighter.

"Why?" He blurts. "Why did you tell them? Couldn't you wait? Just one more month! Was it so hard to do?"

No, I think. Avert my eyes.

He sighs, exasperated. "The nurse said...they found you on the roof." He gives me this look, scared and sullen. "She said you wanted to jump. Is that true?"

I shrug.

"Please, don't." He peels my hand off the trunk. "I beg you. He's not worth it. None of them are." He waves back,

pauses, hangs his head. "Listen, I'm sorry I got mad. I know why you did it. It's just that...this love you're giving me, it's...I can't—"

A Zhiguli trundles by. Slush slopes over the curb.

He cups my belly. "Promise me, you won't leave me."

I push him away. *Why do you want a girl with a bastard baby? Not enough shit on your plate? I don't understand.*

He answers, like he hears my question. "You're like family to me, Irina. Do you hear me? Family."

Family. I smirk. *Until you meet a boy who looks like Kostya. Fucks like Kostya. No, thanks. I'll be fine on my own.* I pick the lint off his coat. Wool, expensive. Look at his tousled hair, his face. Still beautiful, still young, but old somehow. As if something has been cut from it. Something broke.

"With you I can be myself. I don't have to pretend, to hide, or...I can just...be."

Maybe it's time you stopped. I think. *Stopped hiding.*

Foot steps. Yulia and Anton, hand in hand. Stop a couple meters away. Anton marches up to me and throws words in my face. Measured, quiet. "I want you out of my son's life." Then one more, loud. "Out!"

I recoil.

"Papa, what's this about?" Cries Pavlik.

"What? You know perfectly well what. I'm pulling you out of the shit you got yourself into, Pavlusha."

"We are pulling you out." Corrects Yulia. Her stare burns me.

"Oh, I see how it is. You've decided on this behind my back, did you?" Throws Pavlik. "For my wellbeing, for my brilliant future. I'm sorry if I seem insensitive in any way, but may I ask you something, papa? Did it ever occur to you, to consider," he raises his voice, "or at least to pretend like you have considered my feelings on this matter?"

Anton wants to retort.

"No." Pavlik puts up his hand. "Hear me out. I'm tired. Tired of asking for approval from you, for my every step, every life decision. Do you think—"

"Approval? What right have you to talk about approval!" Anton shakes. Yulia strokes his arm. "You brought home this...this *stray* girl. What did we do? We took her in."

Stray is right, I think.

"We fed her, we clothed her. We thought you were in love, young reckless love. It's understandable, it happens. We forgave you. We thought you were going to be a young father. Your mother convinced your grandmother to move in with us, so you two could have an apartment, to start your own little family. I lost my

car as a result of this!" He thunders. "And you...you lied to us!"

The whine of an ambulance deafens me. A white van with red stripes rides past us. The guard salutes the driver from the booth by the fence. An iron gate slowly opens. The van merges with the traffic. The whine grows weaker. Dies.

"You know something, papa," says Pavlik quietly, his voice low, husky, "this will blow your mind." He takes my hand, squeezes it. "I'm gay."

I gasp, stare at him. His features sharp, insectile. Contorted with fury, held back, held under his face. Wind cuts through my hospital bathrobe. My slippers are wet and cold from the moisture in the ground.

"You *what*?" Anton says, dumbfounded.

"What are you saying this nonsense for, Pavlusha?" Says Yulia. Green. Her eyes, her skin. Green.

"What for?" Pavlik cracks up. "What do you mean, *what for*, mama? Because I *am*. Haven't you noticed? You've read the threats, didn't you? Haven't you wondered?"

Tires rustle. Sim's Mercedes rolls up. The passenger window sinks down. "Heavens!" He cries, looking us over. "This is hardly a convenient place for a talk. Irina, my child, you look frozen. Are they chilling you on purpose?"

They gape at him like he's an apparition. The car, the smile. The scarf. Too much color, flamboyance. Theater.

Sim prances out. "Why the long faces? Yulia Ibragimovna, my dear. Get off this dirty lawn, I implore you. You will mar your shoes."

"Oh." Says Yulia, glancing down.

"Anton Borisovich!" He touches his shoulder, firmly, commandingly. "And here I thought you left without me. Tell me, have you picked out the venue yet? I happen to know a few excellent chefs, good friends of mine. From the most prestigious Moscow restaurants. Need me to put in a word?"

"Restaurants?" Anton is disoriented. "What for?"

"The wedding, of course! What else?"

"There will be no wedding." Says Anton with finality.

"Why not?" Asks Sim, surprised. It's an act, a well-played act. "It'd be easier for Pavel to get an international visa after he's married." His eyes sparkle.

"A visa?" Asks Pavlik.

"We're going on tour." Sim grins. "To America."

Ah. And I'm a convenient tool to make it happen. I yank my hand out of Pavlik's grip.

"America?"

"New York, to be precise. You have to leave something of value at home, so they know you won't defect. A young wife with

a newborn baby is just perfect. My dearest," he addresses Pavlik's parents, "I think it's a good idea for your son to leave Moscow for a while. In light of recent events. Wouldn't you agree?"

Anton's face works on processing the information.

"Well, this is all quite unexpected..." Yulia is stone. Only her lips move. "We need to discuss this, before making any decisions. Right, Anton?"

"Thank you, Sim, for the opportunity." Says Pavlik. "But I'm not going anywhere."

I gape at him. *Have you lost your fucking mind? Get out of this shithole. Go.*

"Oh, this is no place to talk." Says Sim. "Why don't we continue in the comfort of home? What do you say, Irina?"

I don't need to be asked twice. Hop in the car. Soft leather interior. Warm. I blow on my hands, rub them. Pavlik next to me. Sim winds down the window. "Meet you at your place!" Starts the car. "What did you to you parents, you hooligan? Look at them. They're about to pass out."

"I told them I'm gay." Says Pavlik simply.

"Good heavens!" Sim gasps. "Did you? Well, about time, my child, about time. Did you hear that, Irina? Listen to him. He told them, just like that, under a rowan tree. How romantic. Congratulations."

"You say it like it's no big deal." Protests Pavlik.

"As it should be." Sim is suddenly serious. The Mercedes rolls into the street. "I'm sorry for what happened to you, Irina."

"Sim, can we please—"

"No, you cannot. Shut your precious hole. Irina, look at me." He glances in the rearview mirror. "Your mother...I hope you don't mind me saying this, but what a fish, that woman. What a fish!"

Catfish, to be precise, I smirk. And I don't mind at all.

"You're grown some wings, I see. Good for you. Good for you for exposing the truth."

It falls off me, the weight. The words. The words he said. *Good for you. Good for you.* I feel light, so light. Validated.

You salacious lump of slime, Sim. I think. You're the one who's abusing Pavlik, and I loathe you for it. But thank you.

Pavlik shudders. "Can we please not talk about this right now? I don't think—"

"Silence!" Sim roars. "I'm talking to your future wife. That filthy nasty pig. What's he got for a cock, a pizzle?"

"Sim, please!" Pavlik cries.

"Don't interrupt me!"

I grin. *A pizzle. Yeah, something like that.*

Pavlik glances at Sim, at me. "You know, sometimes I can't help it but to experience both extreme love and extreme hatred toward this man."

I'm beginning to understand you, I think.

"Liar. You worship me." Parries Sim. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"Oh, but how can I?"

We stop at the light.

And the skin. My skin, expands. Like I'm shedding, like I'm...changing.

Pedestrians crawl across the street, sluggish, still stiff from winter. Garbed in cheap fur. Rodents. Rats, shrews, minks. *Food, I think. You're nothing but food for me.* Flex my fingers. Feathers. Yawn. My mouth is hooked, heavy.

I'm an eagle, I think, like from that Grebenshchikov's song about the golden city.

My heart beats hard. *Eaglet, look at me.*

I see it. Says the eaglet. *Can we go flying?*

The car is suddenly too small.

The girl is gone.

And the mouse...is no more.

There is an eagle. It bursts through the window, soars up. Spreads wings over Moscow. Screams, disappointed. It's not golden, it's dull, monotonous. Dirty melting snow. Black roads, train tracks, dark creeping cars, naked trees. Grey apartment

blocks squat in colorless haze like they're taking a dump. It's a living thing, Moscow, a web of concentric lines. It squirms, it clamors. It hungers. An arthropod with a dozen legs projecting from its fat busy center. Five red eyes in the middle. The Red Square. Spiral orbs around it. The Boulevard ring. The Garden ring. Six more.

It's a spider.

It sees the eagle. Flexes. It wants to catch it, liquefy it, suck it dry and leave an empty husk. More red eyes open. Soviet flags. Demonstrations, demands. They stare at the eagle.

It screams and, distracted, slams into the wall of a Stalinist high-rise, one of the Seven Sisters, seven spider venom glands. Topped with sharp steeples. Fangs. Drops of clear toxin on their tips. Feathers brush against abrasive concrete, break off, seesaw to the ground. The eagle tumbles down a good twenty meters, recovers.

The spider gives an earsplitting squall. Car honks, breaks, animal shrieks. It gathers its legs. Hairs stand up on them. Its eyes swivel, focus on the bird.

It jumps.

The eagle looks on in horror.

The whole of Moscow detaches itself from the ground. Drips poison, years of famine, oppression, corruption. Slavery. Civil war. Collectivization, communism, socialism. Red Terror. It

intoxicates every creature born into it from the first breath. First scream. Strangles it, squashes it. Makes it crawl in misery, submit to its power until it has full control. Until it eradicates will, confidence, individuality. Until there is nothing left, no optimism, no faith, only spite. Bitter hidden spite. Followed by depression, alcoholism, and suicide.

The spider is mid-jump.

Fifty meters away, forty.

Thirty.

The eagle rises higher, desperate, and that's when it sees them. Other birds, escaping. Colorful, exotic. Birds of paradise. Cockatiels, popinjays, lories. Macaws. They squawk, dart, dodge. The uproar is deafening.

The eagle panics. Sees a black dot in their midst. Careens, swings around. The butterfly. A black admiral. It flitters in confusion. The eagle dips under, offers its back. Then the wind hits them, a vortex, an eddy of dust, twigs, and dirt. The eagle loses altitude, fights to stay aloft.

The spider's head emerges from the heart of the twister. Something small squats on top of it, something dark. Four legs, two tusks.

The boar.

The butterfly hovers right over its snout. The boar's eyes glisten. It opens its maw and swallows it.

The bird and the spider collide.

Feathers, bones, teeth crackle. The eagle's beak flashes in mad frenzy, takes out boar's eyes to its shrill squeals, jets of blood. The boar charges, blind, falls off the spider and plummets to the ground. The spider clamps the bird. Fangs pierce it, inject it with venom.

The pain, the incredible pain.

I jerk, heart pounds in my ears.

Car. I'm inside a car. Sim's Mercedes. Parked by Pavlik's Khrushchovka. Same entrance. Same alcoholic passed out on the bench. Same denuded elm, but no vultures, no ravens. No birds of any kind.

Sim steps out, lights a cigarette.

"Feeling better?" Asks Pavlik.

I stare at him, flabbergasted.

"You slept through the ride."

Something in my face worries him. "Don't be afraid. There's nothing they can do. Really, it makes no difference now. It's all out, in plain sight. I actually feel better. If not for you, I wouldn't have had the courage. So...thank you. Coming?" He offers me a hand.

I clamber out.

The city, the street I stand on, is alive. A tremor runs through cracked asphalted, a stealthy rumble. It's going to pounce, and I know exactly when.

The wedding, I think, it'll happen at the wedding. The boar will strike, and the butterfly will die.

Chapter 26. Otter

I stand in front of the mirror, in the ZAGS foyer. It's a quarter to ten in the morning. The day of our marriage registration. Saturday. March. Spring. Two bribes made it happen. I'm underage. I look at reflections. Gaudy sofas, wall panels inlaid with nauseating depictions of spousal happiness. Ten other couples awaiting their turn. Veils, suits, bouquets. Red sashes stamped with WITNESS in gold. And my tacky white dress. Grandma made it from a curtain, since none of store gowns fit me. Puffy sleeves, frilly skirt.

I need to vomit on myself, I think, to decorate it some more. So much for an eagle, you dumb gravid chicken.

"Nervous?" Pavlik fingers his necktie.

I flinch. Push his hand away, smooth the knot, tighten it. Careful to move my left arm. *Would you be nervous, I think, if you knew your groom is about to be killed, but you didn't know how or when? You knew who'd do it and you knew it'd be your fault, because you failed to convince him to call off the wedding?*

I search his eyes.

It's like he threw up a wall.

"Me too." He sighs. "I just hope no one makes a scene. I've had enough drama this week." He inspects the tie in the mirror, brushes off invisible lint, flattens his hair.

That's a good hope to have, I think. My hope is to kill Lyosha before he kills you.

"I know what you're thinking."

I tilt my head. *Do you?*

"Put it out of your mind. Please. Let's forget everything for a day. It's *our* day. It's supposed to be happy. Look, we're surrounded with people. What could possibly go wrong?" He groans. "Stop staring at me like this. Can you do me a favor?"

A woman's voice rings out loudly, "Pavel and Irina Baboch! Ten minutes!"

Baboch, I think. Already?

"Pavlusha, it's almost time." Yulia calls.

"Just a moment! Irina," he says to me, "let's enjoy today, okay? Let's have fun."

Oh, I'll have fun. I think.

"I do love you, you know." He says forcefully.

I back away.

"How else can I prove it to you, die for you or something?" He gives an uneasy chuckle.

My heart stops. *Don't say that! Don't you fucking say that!*

"Do you love me?"

His face is so close.

I freeze. *Of course I do, you piece of glorious ass. Every bride has already checked you out at least twice and burned a hole in me with jealous stares. Go tell them you're gay, so they'll stop hating me.*

"You know what...I'm scared," he says, "scared of leaving you. I'm so used to your constant presence, your silence. I can hear you thinking. You're always there, always listening. I'll miss you. I'll miss you very much." He plays with my fingers.

"Will you miss me?"

I close my eyes. *Stop, please. I'm already bleeding.*

The front door bangs open.

Here they come, I think and go rigid.

Lenochka runs up first, grabs handfuls of my skirt.

"Irkadura is getting married! Irkadura is getting married!"

"Shut your mouth." Says Sonya. "Irka! You fat dolt." She sweeps me into a slimy hold.

"Oy! Irka! See? What did I tell you, huh? What did I tell you? You look so pretty!" Grandma claps her hands, cackles. Golden teeth, bad breath.

I cringe.

Mama is the last to greet me, squiffed already. I endure her wet kisses and flabby embrace. I prefer her this way.

"Good morning, Marina Viktorovna." Says Yulia. "So nice of you to come right on time."

"Yulechka!" Marina scoops her up. Yulia's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets.

"Forgive me, Marina Viktorovna," Anton coughs, before continuing "but this is a special day for our children. May I ask you to go light on the alcohol today?"

"What's this to you? Who are you to command me?"

"Excuse me! Everyone?" Says Pavlik. "I request you to be civil today. Just one day. Can you manage it? Mama, why are you looking at me like it's my funeral?"

"That's funny! Dead groom! Dead groom!" Lenochka hops.

Sonya smacks her.

"Funeral!" Yulia is shocked. "Don't ever say such things, Pavlusha. It's bad luck!"

The moment she says it. That moment I was waiting for. I feel it. The tremor in the fabric of the city. A thump. A grunt. The boar, fifteen kilometers away. It gallops here. It's on its way.

I touch the knife through my left sleeve. The handle, at my elbow. The blade, at my wrist. *Come closer, piggy, closer. I will gut you.*

Our names are called. We're ushered into the hall. It's stark, utilitarian. Empty, save for a threadbare rug leading to

a massive desk, a couple Russian flags on it. Chairs lined by the walls.

A woman stands by the desk. Stolid. Short arms, bandy legs, hands clasped in front. On over-fed peevish otter suffering from boredom. "The Civil Registry Office of the city of Moscow greets you." Her tone is dull. She lisps a little.

A funeral indeed, I think.

"Respected Pavel and Irina. Today is the day of your marriage. In this large and complex world you have found each other to become the most cherished people in each other's lives." Words fall out of her mouth like stones. Flat and automatic.

I tune out. Listen for the boar. Finger the knife.

She asks us if we want to marry.

"Yes," says Pavlik.

I nod.

She asks again.

"Don't ask her. She's mute! Mute *dura*." Mama hiccups. "Slap her, scold her, no good. I've tried everything. Been like that since she was two."

I clench fists. The knife tip punctures my skin. I ignore it. My mind is still. My eyes are focused on mama's face. Pasty, wasted. A word rises in my throat, bucks by the backs of my teeth. As always. I roll it on my tongue.

The otter woman recites the codex of marriage, asks for our signatures, pronounces us husband and wife. Pavlik slips a ring on my finger, I mechanically slip one on his.

Then he kisses me.

A peck. Timid and brief.

My mind, so far away, snaps close. It dizzies me, turns my lips wooden. Then, the grumble. Low and strong. Through the soles of my feet, on the periphery of my hearing. A gallop. Hostile. Hurried. Ripples on the floor. The rug shifts, imperceptibly. I notice.

March of Mendelssohn blares out of the sputtering speakers. Mama cries loudly. Everyone claps, congratulates.

Pavlik leads me out.

Ten steps down. Worn concrete. Asphalt. A black polished Chaika. Sleek indented seats. Moscow streets flash by the window. Wedding pictures at the State University observation point. Back in the car, to city center. The restaurant entrance in the first floor of an opulent Stalinist block. Cream-colored, classic, with columns.

The merry faces, the eyes, the teeth. The rich carpet, the marble. Lavish décor.

I glaze over it, it means nothing.

Where are you? I think. Where are you hiding?

We enter.

The aroma of roast pork, cabbage pies and potatoes. The chef greets us with two crystal flutes. I take mine, down it. Search. Watch for any movement, any shadow. A long table is covered with linen and set in the middle of the room. Cold marble floor. Bright lighting, yellow. The wall on the left is decorated with newlyweds posters. Fake smiles, excessive makeup, stupid hair-sprayed curls. And on the right, draping the window...

I stumble. Almost fall.

"What's wrong?" Pavlik, concerned.

My veins are hot panicked ropes. I'm back to being two, standing in the balcony room of our apartment. Square. Sunny. Window hung with orange curtains. Same color, same thread.

Pavlik leads me to the head of the table, helps me sit.

"Irina, what is it?"

I'm fixated on them. On the curtains. The way they fold, the way they hang, the way the breeze ruffles them. Everything else is gone. Dim. Blurry. Guests pulling out chairs. The scraping, the creaking. The chattering and the clinking.

Anton tinkles on his glass. "I'd like everyone's attention, if I may."

They hush. Look at him, expectant. Locusts, a swarm of hungry locusts. Chirring, itching to strip the table bare. Most of them I don't know. Some distant relatives, some friends.

"Today is a big day for us. Thank you all for gathering here to celebrate the joining of our two families, the creation a brand new family."

Pavlik whispers to me. "You okay?"

I force a smile.

Anton takes off his glasses, cleans them on a napkin, puts them back on. "Pavlusha, our dear Pavlusha, our only son, our pride, our joy." His chin jitters. "We give you into the hands of this young woman, Irina."

"That's right." Mama says. Grandma shushes her.

"Irina, Pavel." Says Anton, ceremonial, inflated owl. "We hope you take care of each other until the end of your days."

Until the end of your days, I feel the knife.

"We wish you love, health, and prosperity. May...*your* child have loving parents. To the newlyweds!" He raises his glass. Hands join him. "To the newlyweds! To the newlyweds!"

"Bitter!" Someone shouts.

"Oy! Bitter, how bitter!"

I'm numb. Numb and petrified. I've been waiting for this for so long, that I've forgotten I want it.

"Is it okay if I...?" Pavlik helps me up.

Don't I disgust you? I think. *Don't I—*

He kisses me. A breath, at first. Then there is none. No breath, no air, only feeling. His lips, so soft, so warm. And

water in my eyes. It spills down my cheeks. I'm mad at myself, mad for losing it, for loving it, for wanting more.

Someone begins to count. "One, two, three..."

"I'd like to—" mama labors up, "—say something."

We pull apart, flushed, surprised.

"This," she points at me, "is my daughter. *My* daughter."

She passes her eyes over the table. "I carried her right here," slaps under her breasts, "just like she's carrying right now."

No, I think. No, mama. Don't.

"Irka, daughter. I'm proud of you, but you need to understand something." A burp. "I'm still angry with you. That baby has no right to be. No right!"

The room goes still.

"Sit!" Grandma says.

"Leave me be, mama. It's my daughter's wedding. I'll say what I want."

And I see it, like in a mirror. A reflection. One generation down. Same intolerance, control, preachy tone.

"Pavel! What a handsome young man you are." Mama's voice quivers. "An actor. You've got good parents, good genes. You'll have a good future. And my Irka..."

Don't, mama.

"She's not a match for you. You're making a big mistake..." she surveys the table. "You all think the same, don't you? You,"

she stabs a finger at Yulia, "you're an educated woman. Why don't you say anything, huh? Your son doesn't want to be with my daughter, you know that! Your son—"

Grandma yanks her down, slaps her.

"Marina Viktorovna," says Yulia through a smile, "why do you say this? At your daughter's wedding? I'm not sure I understand..."

"She's *dura*, that's why." Says grandma.

"It's not true, Marina Viktorovna. I do want to be with Irina," Pavlik cuts through the muttering. "I apologize if I have made such an unfavorable impression on you. This is entirely my fault."

A shadow passes by the window.

I jump. My heart goes berserk.

It's here.

The boar.

Chapter 27. Catfish

I grab Pavlik's arm. Suddenly I know. The place, the time, the scene. It's in front of my eyes. I can almost taste it. The butterfly. The boar. Its small piggy eyes, its maw, its...*you need to get out of here! Now!* I pull him away from the table, screech at him in short urging bursts. *Curse my tongue*, I think. *Rip it out, please, I don't want it. It's useless!* Bite on it. Warm blood fills my mouth. *If I could only talk to you, if I could only explain—*

"Hey, where are you—" He reads terror in my eyes. "Is it Lyosha? Calm down. There is nothing he can do. Not here, not in the room full of people."

I hang on his arm.

The hall doors burst open.

"Surprise!" Lyosha is pissed, pissed good, barely standing. "Holy moly, Irkadura! That's a dress, eh? That's one helluva dress. Blast me, you're big. Look at you. Look...at...you."

Heads turn.

Unshaven, unwashed, crumpled, red carnations in one hand, a bottle of vodka in another, Lyosha Kabansky grins a stupid smile.

I let go of Pavlik's arm, hide my arms behind my back, pinch the tip of the knife, tug it.

"You thought I wouldn't come, eh?" Lyosha waddles to the table. "Marinka, you dumb bitch. Why didn't you tell me where you're going?"

Mama shrinks into the chair.

"Ah, no matter. I found you! Thought I'd see my *daughter* off myself."

The blade sits in my palm now. Long, sharp, new. The carving knife from our wedding present. I hide it in the folds of my skirt. Pull at it. The handle gets stuck at the cuff. *Remember you asked me where I was going? I think, glaring at Lyosha. Well, this is it. This is place. They butcher pigs here, gut them, quarter them, roast them and serve them on a platter, their asses stuffed with lard.*

He grins at me.

You know what they do, I think, to make pigs taste better? They kick them, for days, get them bruised, so they're tender and juicy, and then, as a finishing touch, they rip out their dicks, just to hear them squeal.

"Aleksey Ivanovich!" Anton stands. "We didn't think you were coming."

"Well, I'm here, ain't I?" Lyosha plods over.

Come closer, I think. Come closer.

Four guests between us. Four chairs.

Pavlik notices the knife. "What are you...put it away!"

I sidestep him. *You're drunk out of your fucking mind, Lyosha.* I think. *Good. It'll make my job easier.*

"Irina!" Pavlik reaches for the knife.

I dodge him. My heels click on the parquet.

"Excuse me, Aleksey Ivanovich, but both Irina and I would like for you to leave." Says Pavlik. "Immediately."

"What?" Lyosha makes an effort to focus.

Only Yulia and Anton in his way.

I tense.

"I told you in plain Russian. We'd like for you to leave. You're not welcome here. Do you understand?"

Comprehension wrinkles his porcine face. "Who says? Irka? She can't talk. How do you know what she wants. My Irka wants to see me, don't you?"

I want to see you dead, I think.

His face darkens. "You do, don't you?"

"No, she doesn't." Says Pavlik.

I work at the cuff, free the knife handle. Grasp it.

"I heard that husband prick of yours is not the father." He stops, blocked by Anton. "I say, ditch the faggot. Come home. We'll raise that brat the right way. Like a proper man, like a proper Russian, not some stinking Jew."

"Lyosha—" Starts mama.

"Shut your mouth, slut!"

Did you guess it's yours, you moron? Or did some rat spill the news to you? Words choke me. I want to scam at his face. Grip the handle harder. Sweat rolls down my nose.

"Aleksey Ivanovich." Pavlik shakes. "This is mine and Irina's wedding. We request that you leave at once, or we will have to call militia."

"Pavlusha, Aleksey Ivanovich, take it easy." Anton tries to placate. "Let us all sit down—"

"Papa, we don't want him here!"

Not a scape of a fork, not a breath.

"Did ya know your son is a homo? Did ya?" Lyosha seizes a fistful of the tablecloth and yanks. Glasses fall, plates clatter.

Lenochka shrieks, Sonya curses.

Yulia hangs over Lyosha, hissing. "Get out of here, swine."

Pavlik sucks in air.

"Ya think it's your sonny who knocked her up?" Lyosha roars with laughter. "How do ya think he got it up, eh?" He turns to Pavlik. "Show me your cock, I want to see it. Go on!"

Pavlik stares. His cheeks sprout red blotches.

"What, haven't got one? I thought so. Well, here is a bit of news for ya, for your wedding night. It was I who fucked her.

I!" His blood-shot eyes bulge. "And that's not all of it. I'm not the first, ya hear? You know how many before me? She's lain with all of Marinka's mongrels, every one of them! She's whore. That's whom you married. A whore!"

"Don't...call...my wife...a whore." Says Pavlik.

It happens very fast.

He skirts his parents, raises a fist and drives it into Lyosha's jaw. Lyosha careens, balances for a moment and drops to the floor with a thud. The bottle of vodka breaks to a loud clink, carnations scatter. Mama screams. Guests jump up, crane necks.

"Damned faggot." Lyosha scrambles up, jagged bottle neck in front of him.

The eaglet kicks me. *Get it! Get it!*

I will, I think, and I charge.

"Irina!" Pavlik grabs for me, misses, steps on my skirt. It rips. I trip, flair arms for purchase. Lyosha ogles the knife in my hand. His eyes widen. He stoops, aims the bottle at my belly. I'm falling straight on it, nothing for me to hold on to.

A body rams me aside.

I cry out.

Pavlik is in my place. Arms spread wide, dark, in his new jacket bought for the wedding. Like wings. Wings of a butterfly. Lyosha's hand moves upward. The glass teeth cut Pavlik's neck,

that tender place between the shirt collar and his cleanly shaved chin. Blood splutters on the tie knot, the knot I smoothed just this morning. Pavlik gasps.

For a second they regard each other, out of time, out of place. Then they topple. Lyosha flat on his back, Pavlik on top. I land two steps away. My head hits the floor, I give a yelp, knife clutched firmly in my hand.

The hall goes deathly quiet.

I blink, focus. Table legs. Chairs. Shoes. Pavlik convulses, dark blood leaks from his neck on Lyosha's grimy sweater. Lyosha swears, shoves him off. Pavlik flops to the floor, face up.

My mind leaves me.

I'm a knot of excruciating pain. I get up to all fours, rise and leap at Lyosha. My horrible scream fills the room, echoes off the walls, drowns people's shouts. I saddle him, belly to belly, lift my arm and strike. I plunge the knife deep into his gut. It becomes one thing with my hand, the knife. I don't hold it anymore. It's part of me. The beak of an eagle. I wrench it out, stab him. Again. And again. Lyosha gurgles.

My hand gets slippery, sticky. I taste salt on my lips. My dress stains red, like Soviet flag, like pioneer neckerchiefs I used to wear to school. Like bloody stains on my sheets. Like the ragged hole in Kostya's chest. Like the eyes of the spider.

Like the scattered carnations.

Do it! Do it! Eaglet is hysterical.

I am, eaglet. I am.

Gut it!

I'm gutting it.

Cut off its dick!

I will!

Screams around me. Someone lifts me by the armpits. I toss my head up and holler, with the force of years. Years of silence. I howl until my voice cracks, until I grow short of breath. Then I see her.

Mama.

"Lyosha! Lyosha! What did she do to you? What did *dura* do to you?" She shakes his limp body. Her upper lip curls, mustache bristles. Barbels of a catfish. Dazed milky eyes fix on me. Malice in them. Hatred and disgust. "You bitch." She looks scary, ghastly, teeth missing, bleached hair lank over her face. "You killed him! You killed him!" She raises a hand.

It's on me in a split second. The day. The sun. Mama on the naked mattress. The pisspot, panties on my ankles. I drop the knife, block her arm. That word I held inside me for fourteen years, that word, breaks through.

"*Dura.*" I say. I feel strange, moving my tongue, forming sounds. I try again. "*Dura.*"

"What?" Mama's eyes round.

"Dura." I repeat, suck in air, scream. "Dura! You stupid
dura! You *dura, dura, dura!*"

Shouts around me.

"Call the ambulance!"

"He's hurt!"

"My son is bleeding! Somebody help him!"

A pair of arms lift me, and still I yell on repeat. That
word. That one word. The flood that I can't stop.

Mama's face scrunches up, like she's about to cry.

I wrest from the hold, fall to my knees, push Yulia out of
the way. "Pavlik!" I say, for the first time. Touch his face,
search his eyes, trying to see something in them, anything.

There is nothing.

They're still.

He's gone.

Chapter 28. Vobla

My waters break. Warm fluid on my legs. Wet stockings, drenched skirt. At first I think it's piss. Sim pulls me off Pavlik's body, half-drags, half-carries me to a nearby chair. My bridal pumps, stained with blood, slide off my swollen feet. My hands shake, my breath. My ears, white noise. Sim's urgent whispers. Mama's wails. Militia, ambulance sirens. An echo in the street, getting closer. My belly spasms like it's cinched with a tight hot belt.

I double over. *Eaglet!*

It's time.

But it's early!

I want out.

Stay! They'll take you away from me.

Why?

I killed a man.

No, says the eaglet. You slaughtered a boar.

"Heavens, child! You're wet!" Sim says over my head. "Did your waters break?"

He killed Pavlik, I think. Eaglet. He killed Pavlik.

It, says the eaglet. It killed Pavlik. You slaughtered it because it deserved it.

But it's my fault, eaglet. My fault.

No.

"Tell the medics she's in labor!"

I will go to jail.

"Breathe, Irina, breathe. Let's do it together. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out."

Eagles don't go to jail, people do.

"Are you listening to me? Lis-ten to me! You need to breathe."

What do eagles do?

"Vadim Grachev, ambulance doctor." A new voice, official, vacant. "What happened?"

"I think she's in labor."

Cold hands on me. A swarthy face with close-set beady eyes. The smell of disinfectant and cigarettes.

Eagles fly.

Where?

Away.

I don't want to fly away without you. You're the only one I have. I've lost everyone else.

I'll come with you. I have wings, remember?

Two medics frisk about my dress, haul me onto a stretcher.

"Pavlik!" I cry. My voice unfolds, bounds around. Hands push me down. A want to sit up and I can't. Another contraction, stronger this time. A circle of flames around my abdomen. I groan, close my eyes.

"You'll be fine, Irina." Whisper in my ear. "You're stronger than you think you are. You've grown wings, you can't give up now. Use them, before they clip them." A pat on the shoulder, and Sim is gone.

I'm hoisted into the van.

Empty, blank. I feel nothing. Stare at the ceiling.

An emergency nurse in a tarnished lab coat climbs in. Another goose stupefied from fatigue. Faded lipstick, sunken cheeks. A red metal case, scuffed, with a red cross painted over a white circle stands on the floor. She unlocks it, produces a gauzy cloth and starts wiping my face without a word.

A militiaman, young, in an ill-fitting uniform, dry as a vobla, with a thin mustache and an irritated bony face, bangs the doors shut, squats next to the nurse.

The engine revs. The ambulance starts. The siren whoops with annoying repetition.

My head rocks from side to side. And something rises from my gut, slips into my mouth. Words. Other words I haven't said yet. The tangle of them presses forth. I look at the nurse, at

the militant. "I can talk. I can talk now." It comes out clumsy. I wet my lips, want to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Shhh." Says the nurse. "We'll be there soon."

"How far?" Asks the vobla man.

"Fifteen minutes or so. What'd she do?"

"Knifed her father. At her wedding, imagine that."

"Jesus!" The nurse withdraws, shoots me a horrified look.

"He's not my father." I say. "He's a boar."

The militant whispers to the nurse. She nods.

"I couldn't talk for fourteen years." I say. Rolling 'r' is the hardest part. I do it. I do it like I always knew how. I want to share this, I want somebody to hear me.

The nurse covers her mouth, her eyes wide.

"You think I'm dumb." I say. "Mad, crazy. But I'm not. I'm really not. I'm just me." I sweat. It's hard to talk. But I can't...can't stop. Can't shut up.

The nurse shakes her head.

"They couldn't swallow me, the beasts." I say. "I was too much for them. I got stuck in their throats."

"Ruslan!" The nurse tells the driver. "Hurry up. The patient is delirious."

"So they spit me out." I tell the vobla man. He leans back, slides his visor cap on his eyes, pretends to nap.

"Five more blocks!" The driver says, whistles some tune.

"They took away my voice, but I got it back. I got it back." I say. "They can't take it away now, can they?"

The nurse stares past me.

"I let the animal out, that's all I did. Is it a crime to want to talk?" I wait for some reaction. For anything. I get the sour smell of fear, the engine rumble, and the monotone whine of the siren. "It doesn't matter that I talk now, does it. You don't hear me."

Another contraction. I roll to the side, pull up my legs, pant. It lasts an eternity, finally passes. Their indifference maddens me, their apathy, their pretense.

"You're a dumb goose." I say to the nurse. "You're so afraid, you forgot you're afraid. Fear soaked into your muscles, made you insensible. You pretend not to care, that's your escape. Torpor, stupidity and cowardice."

The nurse flinches. "What's that?"

"Don't listen to her." Says the militant. "She's schizo." He knocks a forefinger on his head. "Butchered the guy like a pig, with a kitchen knife. You should've seen the wounds."

"And you," I gaze at him, "are a vobla. A meek fish, spineless and dim. You hide because you have no teeth. You suck rotting gruel with your mouth, silt and mud. That's your diet. You're a swindle and a cheat, living off bribes."

He goes pale. "Shut your mouth, *dura!* What did I tell you? Schizo."

The driver honks at someone, curses.

The van lurches.

"You know I'm right," I say, "both of you. You're so used to hypocrisy, you don't see it anymore. It's a nice way to exist, but not a way to live. You're empty husks. You fell into the trap of trusting this place, its lies, and you've lost your humanness. It's been sucked out of you, but you don't miss it, do you? What's to miss? Honesty? Kindness? Compassion? No, fuck it. It's too painful, too hard, it's easier to be a dimwitted beast."

The siren dies. The van stops. The doors open. Fresh scent of rain. A new medic hoists out the stretcher, heaves it on the gurney, and swears. "Oho! A bride? What's all this blood?"

"I've practiced in butchery today, for the first time." I say. It gives me immense pleasure to move my tongue, make sounds, hear them ring out. "Gutted a pig. I can practice on you, if you'd like."

The medic recoils. "Crazy, this one."

"You want her to give birth right here, in the street? Roll her in!"

I bend. A spasm. Light rain, gusts of cold wind. The wheels of the gurney jolt over cracks in the asphalt. Sharp medicinal

smell, fluorescent lights of the clinic lobby. Shabby interior, impartial faces, stuffed air.

"What's this?" A woman's voice. "Good God, look at all the blood!"

"She murdered her father. At her wedding too, imagine that. Knifed him, in broad daylight. He's got more than twenty wounds, died on the spot, poor fella."

"Good God! You don't say. Why did you bring her here? Is she in labor?"

"About an hour now. Can't you speed it up? I've got to watch the bitch, else she runs off or does something funny."

I force myself to sit up, clasp the sides of the gurney for balance. My bangs, wet, fall over my eyes. "Call me a bitch one more time, and I'll yank out your intestines, make them into a noose and hang you on a meat-hook. Got it?"

"See? She's psycho." Says the vobla man.

The nurse, a raw-boned twitchy goat, crosses herself. "Are you staying then?" She asks him.

"Do I have a choice? Those are my orders."

The din of the lobby dies. The staff behind the registration window, a doctor passing with a stack of papers, pregnant women and their relatives seated in chairs along the wall hung with bulletin boards stare me up and down, agitated.

"What? You don't like my dress?" I look down at myself and laugh. It's ludicrous and horrific. Gown made from a curtain, torn, bloodied, wet from rain, swollen over my belly. My dirty feet stick out from under the hem, no shoes, ripped nylon tights. Red gloves of Lyosha's gore on my hands. And the odor. I stink. Of sweat, blood, and vaginal fluids.

The nurse and the militant wheel me into the elevator, push me out on what must be the delivery ward. Overcrowded, filled with moaning rumpled women, crawling along the hallway, stooping from pain, their ripe breasts swollen, stomachs bursting. One girl, my age, vomits on the floor.

A cramp. Needles jab my groin. I shriek.

"Keep your mouth shut!" Says the militant.

"Come closer," I say, "and I'll rip you."

They thrust me into a long narrow room, appallingly dirty, crammed with portable beds, women in various stages of childbirth. Cows, vulnerable, exhausted, left to struggle by themselves.

"Go wash." The nurse hands me a hospital gown. "End of the hallway. She ain't going anywhere, don't worry." She says to the militiaman. "Come. Have some tea in the canteen. This is no place for men."

"No funny business, you hear? I'll find you if you run." He gives me a dubious look and departs.

The women study me. Ten of them or so.

I wriggle out of the wretched dress. Tear off the tights, the bra, the panties. Toss them to the floor.

"What's happened to you?" Asks the girl by the door, young, beautiful in the classical Russian way, high cheekbones, long neck, if not for the dark circles under her eyes and pallid skin, shiny from sweat.

"My mama's boyfriend raped me." I say with surprising calm. "Knocked me up."

"No. The blood!"

"I killed him."

She gapes in horror, shrinks back.

I press the robe to my breast, and, naked, waddle out.

Chapter 29. Eagle

I don't make it to the bathroom. Collapse on the floor.

Contraction after contraction. Nine agonizing hours. I retch, I cry. I'm hauled into the delivery room. My pubes get shaved with a rusty razor. An enema is forced in my anus. The doctor, a brusque woman with sharp canine features, declares that I'm unable to dilate. Bluish light reflects in the lines of her face, her silhouette stark against white-tiled walls. Angry, rude and spiteful.

"Five centimeters. You're not trying hard enough." She says.

The baby's head is ripping me. It's unbearable. Wet with sweat, feverish, frantic, I scream.

"What are you yelling for?" Shouts the doctor. "Who asked you to get pregnant? It didn't hurt screwing, did it? But now you cry like it hurts? Shut your mouth and push!" Her harsh face twists with resentment.

"What would you know about screwing?" I say. "When was the last time you got laid, you sadistic bitch? Who'd want to fuck you? You're nothing but a yapping mutt—" Pain cuts me off.

"Push, *dura*, push!"

I grunt from effort.

"Bad mother! You'll suffocate the baby! Push!"

Two nurses throw themselves on my stomach, press. I can't draw air.

"Give me the scalpel. I'm cutting her open." The doctor leans in. Fire. Hot fire splits my perineum. I holler in agony.

"I got the head! Push!"

I do. Feel it slide out of me. Shoulders, body, legs. My belly collapses onto itself like a deflated balloon. I can't see through tears. Everything aches, every muscle, every bone.

"It's a boy!" The nurse says.

"Pavlik." I say. "Pavlik!"

And then, a cry, weak at first, growing stronger. A reddish squirming thing, held in gloved hands. Screaming. Louder, louder. A tag with a number tied to its foot, an identical one to my wrist.

"Give him to me." My voice is hoarse from screaming.

The nurse wipes him, swaddles him, carries him out.

"Where is she taking him? I want my baby! Give me my baby!"

My abdomen contracts. Something else plops out. I'm so weak, so weak. The nurse cleans me roughly, stitches me up, needle on flesh.

And I lose it.

Lose it.

I wake up in a dark room, groggy. My breasts ache, engorged with milk. No baby at my side. I throw off the blanket, shift my legs and stifle a cry. My crotch ripples with pain. I grip the headboard, struggle to standing. Listen.

Soft snores. Measured breathing. Bodies around me on beds. Grey light from the window. Sky hung with clouds, gilded from underneath with rising sun.

"There is blue sky behind the clouds, and the golden city," I whisper, "the place where eagles live."

I step into slippers a size too big, creep to the door, turn the knob. The hinges creak. I freeze. Someone rolls over with a sigh. Springs whine, settle. I slip out, lean on the wall, shuffle toward cries, baby cries. I hear them. There, ahead, in the darkness. Doors, doors, more doors. A nurse station with a nurse asleep, her head on the desk. A corridor at right angle. Another. There.

A line of square windows, shoulder-level.

The nursery.

I press my face to the glass. Weak light. Two rows of insect-like trolleys on casters. Atop each a plastic tray with a newborn. Twenty of them. Swaddled, heads in bonnets, tags with numbers tied around the bottom ends. Most are asleep, a few are crying. Scrunched up faces gape with toothless holes.

"Pavlik." My breath fogs up the glass. I wipe it, try the door. It's unlocked. Step in, walk up the row. "Pavlik?" One voice stops crying. In the corner, by the plastic baby scales. I rush to it, lean over. My hands are shaking.

A face looks at me. Round, stubborn, like mine. Eyebrows in a frown. Eyes dark, unblinking. Beads of tears on the eyelashes, one spilled on a cheek.

I check the tag. "Baboch Pavel Pavlovich, boy, labor: March thirteenth, three twenty A.M. Weight three kilograms, height fifty centimeters." I gently lift him, free my breast.

He latches on at once. His jaw works as he sucks. My nipples buzz. Milk spills from my other breast in a warm trickle, soaks the robe. I stroke his cheek, his forehead, his nose. My tears drip on his blanket. "Pavlik, it's mama. How are you?"

He breathes quietly, working. His nostrils flare.

"It's me, remember, eaglet? Is it okay if I call you Pavlik?"

He sucks, hungry.

Footsteps echo from the corridor.

A stone drops in my stomach. I watch Pavlik in fear. He spits the nipple out, hiccups. A thin line of saliva trails from his lips.

"Don't worry, I won't let them take you away." I cover my breast, slink out, halt by the door, listen.

The steps round the corner.

"There she is!" The vobla man points at me. Next to him is the delivery doctor, her lips pressed into a line.

"You can't have him, he's mine!" I run to the end of the hallway, to the window. It's cracked open. A weak wind carries in the smell of dust and car exhaust. I grab the frame, step on the hot radiator, hoist myself up on the windowsill.

"Where are you going?" Asks the militant.

"No use talking to her." Barks the doctor. "Get her down."

A door opposite the nursery cracks open, a head sticks out.

"Somewhere where I don't have to see your ugly mugs." I say.

A couple tired post-labor women gather, ask the doctor about me.

"That's enough!" The militant strides to the window, a hand on his holster. "Get down, or I'll have to make you."

"What for, so I'll confess?" I raise my voice. "I won't, because I'm not sorry! I would've killed him over and over! You accuse me of manslaughter, of committing a crime. But who are you to decide what's unlawful? What do you do, day in and day out? You lie and abuse and take bribes!"

He stops a couple meters away. "Last warning. Get down."

"Or what? You will shoot me? Go ahead. Shoot me. Is that all you can do?" I pass my eyes over the assembly. They're all scared, expectant. Curious. "You're animals, caged by fear." I grip Pavlik firmer. He's quiet, looks at me with his trusting eyes. I open the windowpane wider, peer out.

Hear a collective intake of air.

Moscow is waking. Grim, bleak. Seven stories below cars bustle along the street. And above this greyness...gold. Golden backlit clouds.

"Pavlik, we have wings, remember?" I face them. "You think it's the end for me? You're wrong. It's the beginning."

The sky calls to me. Calls to the eagle.

My fingers lengthen into feathers. My robe falls off, gives way to a shiny mantle, black, with a white crown. The garb of a predator.

The eagle.

It waits for the eaglet to crawl on its back. A ball of silver fuzz with tiny talons. Sharp. They sink into the eagle's nape, grip it.

The vobla flings itself at them. The eagle snatches it with its talons, tears off pieces with its beak. Consumes it. Screams at the barking dog, the herd of tired cows. They stampede away. The eagle turns around, clumsily, moving first one leg, then another. Perches on the edge of the sill.

The clouds are gone. The sky is blue. The sun burns over Moscow. The eaglet trembles, squeals, sinks its talons deeper. The eagle spreads its wings and takes off.

The ground below slants, falls back. Buildings blur in the bluish haze. Wind washes over the eagle's body, whistles in its ears, carries it upward. Exhilarated by the flight, it screams. Startles a flock of ravens off a nearby roof. They croak and scatter, abandoning their meal.

A dead jackal.

The eagle and the eaglet fly on.