

Chapter 1

One July morning during a hot, leap-year summer, Elizaveta Andreyevna Bestuzheva walked out of an apartment building on Solyanka Street, the home of her latest lover. She lingered for a moment, squinting in the sun, then straightened her shoulders, raised her head proudly, and hurried along the sidewalk. It was almost ten, but morning traffic was still going strong – Moscow was settling into a long day. Elizaveta Andreyevna walked fast, looking straight ahead and trying not to meet anyone’s gaze. Still, at the corner of Solyansky Proyezd, an unrelenting stare invaded her space, but turned out to be a store’s window dressing in the form of a huge, green eye. Taken aback, she peered into it but saw only that it was hopelessly dead.

She turned left, and the gloomy building disappeared from view. Brushing off the memories of last night and the need to make a decision, Elizaveta felt the relief of knowing she was alone. She was sick of her lover – maybe that was the reason their meetings were becoming increasingly lustful. In the mornings, she wanted to look away and make a quick retreat, not even kissing him good-bye. But he was persistent, his parting ritual enveloping her like a heavy fog. Afterward, she always ran down the stairs, distrusting the elevator, and scurried away from the dreary edifice as if it were a mousetrap that had miraculously fallen open.

Elizaveta glanced at her watch, shook her head, and picked up speed. The sidewalk was narrow, yet she stepped lightly, oblivious of the obstacles: oncoming passersby, bumps and potholes, puddles left by last night’s rain. She wasn’t bothered by the city’s deplorable state, but a new sense of unease uncoiled deep inside her and slithered up her spine with a cold tickle. The giant eye still seemed to stare at her from under its heavy lid. She had a sense of another presence, a most delicate thread that connected her to someone else. Involuntarily, she jerked her shoulders, trying to shake off the feeling, and, after admonishing herself, returned to her contemplation.

Old Square gradually came into view, revealing the church that once stood over public executions, and the commercial section next to it crowded with merchant stalls and cars parked willy-nilly. Elizaveta navigated like a seasoned pilot, her shoes squelching in mud seemingly left over from centuries past. Finally, she reached the flimsy fence that, by some strange design, had no gate. She shook her head, stepped gracefully over a massive chain, and found herself in a park with the cool shade she longed for, even though it was still early in the day.

Then began the long journey up the hill. Elizaveta winked at Saints Cyril and Methodius, who stared bleakly at a plaque reading “From a Grateful Nation” – a bitter joke about a nation that never learned how to be grateful. She skirted a bench with a sleeping bum

who exuded an unbearable stench, and, after a brief hesitation, took the left alley, which was slightly more shaded than the right.

The promise of another blistering day loomed over Moscow. The park was full of people – victims of morning hangovers, refugees from the nearby office buildings, clutching their beer cans. The adjacent bar was also far from empty. The waitress wandered lazily between the tables, fully aware of the power she wielded. Elizaveta surveyed the unfriendly territory. She noted the casualties dispassionately, without registering their faces, which looked blank in their identically aloof, self-absorbed expressions. She walked with virtually no effort, pretending to float above the sidewalk, the meager greenery, and the bushes filled with trash. Only once did she stumble – and it brought back the sense of that persistent, hidden gaze. She was probably only imagining it, but her heart remained heavy and her thoughts disintegrated into a confused jumble.

As she reached the top of the hill, the sun sliced into her eyes, and the smell of asphalt and burned gasoline filled her nostrils. Elizaveta crossed the road and arrived at the Polytechnic Museum, which cast a much better shadow than the despondent trees. Many years ago, this spot housed a zoo. The museum had fallen on hard times – possibly the hardest since the zoo’s Indian elephant broke under the persistent attention of gawkers and went on a rampage. The fate of the museum, much like the fate of the elephant, was regrettable, but Elizaveta had her own concerns. She continued to feel uneasy and even glanced over her shoulder. There was nothing there. She hesitated at a theater poster framed behind glass, watching the wavy reflections, but they looked harmless enough. Then she snorted, frustrated with herself, and read the advertisement inviting passersby to learn about varieties of packaging at a Packers’ Club that had found a home in the impoverished building. For a moment, she felt amused, and her unease took on a mystical, ghostly quality. Past the museum, Elizaveta gave the menacing Lubyanka building a cursory look and descended into the underground walkway, which led to her office building on Maly Cherkassky. With a glance at her watch, she hastened up the stairs – but the exit beckoned her with its bookstalls, and she gave in and began to examine the covers.

One of the books caught her attention. She opened up an imposing black tome, but somebody jostled her elbow and the book tumbled out of her hands, wreaking colorful havoc on the neatly arranged stand. In the resulting commotion, the woman next to Elizaveta yelped with surprise, a man’s deep voice muttered an apology, and the proprietor of the kiosk rushed to straighten out his wares, worried he might get robbed. Elizaveta tossed an absentminded “It’s okay” in the direction of the voice, whose owner’s face she never saw, and stepped aside to leaf through another book with a picturesque dust jacket. Its contents, however, proved to be too serious, and the second page was branded with a triangle that nearly covered the entire sheet. She immediately remembered something she once read: *The triangle is a grand figure; it controls souls*. It was an ill-timed sign, a dumb hint verging on mockery. Embarrassed, Elizaveta cast a furtive glance around, set the book down, and hurried away from the racks

toward the old, five-story building that housed small companies and underfunded government offices.

Elizaveta's colleague, a staunch feminist, Masha Rozhdestvenskaya, who called herself Margot, greeted Elizaveta amiably, seeming not to notice her lateness. The reason was simple: Masha was dying of curiosity. Not long before Elizaveta's arrival, a messenger had knocked on the door and handed the dumbstruck Masha a large bouquet of roses wrapped in golden tinfoil. "For Ms. Bestuzheva," he said and disappeared, dissolving into the Moscow smog. The card clipped to the edge of the tinfoil said nothing but *From a suitor* written in ornate cursive with fancy flourishes.

Masha had never seen a card like that, and she was surprised beyond measure. The moment Elizaveta stepped into the office, she was barraged with questions, which, unfortunately, found no answers. The occurrence had no explanation; all they knew for sure was that Bestuzheva had a secret admirer, a fact so strange that it irritated rather than thrilled or entertained. Elizaveta's life held no mysteries, and having little faith in lucky accidents, she preferred to choose her admirers herself.

"You know," she said to Masha pensively, "I stopped by a kiosk, they had a book... Can you imagine, I opened it, and there was a triangle on page two. I have no idea what it means."

"It's for fevers," Margot explained, her eyes narrowing, matching the sarcasm in her tone. "A triangle spell is the best cure for it. They draw it on a piece of paper, or on wolf skin like they did in the old days. It clears the illness right up."

"Come on," Elizaveta said, offended. "I'm serious. Triangles control the soul. It said so right there: *Thy soul is not thy body*. Then something else I couldn't figure out, and at the end, *Thy soul is love...*"

"*Thy soul is love,*" her coworker repeated thoughtfully. "Wow. Your life is never boring, eh, girlfriend? Liz the little vixen."

Elizaveta felt awkward. She responded with an absent smile and went in search of a water jar for the flowers while Masha continued to cast sidelong glances at the strange bouquet, as if still trying to find the key to this mystery that was eluding both of them.

A fervent enemy of mysteries – especially those concerning the opposite sex – Masha Rozhdestvenskaya had no faith in signs and solitary bouquets. She'd had strained relationships with men since her youth, each more like a protracted war than a romantic dream. Many thought she was weak-willed, so they used her without compunction in exchange for compliments, presents, and small favors. Once they got what they wanted, they would disappear without a trace, leaving the inconsolable Masha to lick her love wounds. Over time, her heart grew hard and men continued to treat her like a toy in their hands. Her illusions wilted, and it hurt more than the loneliness to which she was beginning to grow accustomed.

Eventually, Masha went on a counteroffensive. It proved to be successful: she managed to turn the tables, convincing first herself, then others it was she who used her lovers indiscriminately, walking away with pleasure, money, and more gifts and favors. And if they happened to disappear too soon, it wasn't a problem. There were plenty of fish in the sea; she just had to cast the net.

People began to respect and sometimes even fear her. The victim had turned into a lioness, albeit with a somewhat cornered look she had learned to hide. But the metamorphosis drained her of vitality, and she was now building it back up brick by brick, ruthlessly dismissing, as frivolous whim, all that defied rational cynicism. According to the latest fashion, she interpreted the eccentricities of love and the ensuing thrills as a chemical defect in the brain, like the warring energies of different colors that can't find a balance. Feelings were transient; colors tended to merge into a dull gray. In her current state, Masha didn't think they were even worth talking about. Instead of looking for implausible meanings, it was much more fun to discuss haircuts, Tarot cards, and dogs. She loved dogs: her pug slept right in her bed, and she thought of her greyhound, who had recently died of old age, as the incarnation of some kindred spirit.

Though not particularly friendly, she and Elizaveta weren't openly hostile, either. Their work was boring; the travel agency was nothing more than a front for the machinations of some big shot whose name was never said out loud. As such, the company had to provide perfect form with no pretense of substance. Business was slow; the agency was mostly in the red, but a certain young man never failed to deliver their salaries, which were rather high by Moscow standards.

All in all, everyone was happy. Masha and Elizaveta covered the walls with posters, littered their desks and the windowsill with brochures, and filled the office with Tibetan music and Chinese figurines. African masks hung on the wall to the right of the entrance, across from the glossy map of the two hemispheres crisscrossed with flight paths, as if to validate the company's readiness to send a client to the ends of the earth if necessary. If Mr. Big Shot ever decided to drop by in his free time, he would like what he saw. To the disappointment of both women, however, his time was never free. Would-be travelers were also a rare occurrence. The women spent their days in the virtual world of the Internet and the pages of books while their presence livened up the somewhat drab office, like butterflies decorating a dusty bush.

Of the two, Masha was the more alluring. Her dark hair was nothing short of splendid; her eyes were big, her mouth sinfully sensual. Her cheekbones were a bit on the wide side, but some would consider that another asset, as it suggested a similarity to the women of the Transvolga known for their insatiable appetite for love. Her overall appearance constantly reaffirmed the tumultuous nature of life. But she knew reality could be duller than appearances, so she was no stranger to somewhat shocking urges, especially in the company of people of privilege. Still, she never sank to the level of full-blown indecency.

Next to Masha, Elizaveta looked like a Cinderella relegated to the background. Plus, she was four years younger than her coworker; she'd turned twenty eight the month before. They couldn't have been more different in their demeanor and, while the eye first rested on the *femme fatale* Margot, the two quickly balanced each other out and it was impossible to say which one stood a better chance in sustained battle.

Either way, a helmet of dark blonde hair perfectly framed Elizaveta's narrow face, with its graceful nose and green-speckled, catlike eyes. She did resemble a large cat from the front, but in profile she looked more like an exotic bird. All this was augmented by very delicate skin and narrow wrists and ankles – a legacy of her aristocratic lineage, lost in the quagmire of intermarriage but still evident in her last name and proud bearing. All she knew for sure was that one of her grandmothers was of the Polish gentry. It seemed that grandmother's genes had skipped a generation to define her refinement and grace, and maybe to predispose her to pragmatic romanticism, which the rules of metropolitan life forced her to hide. Not that romanticism was lacking in the Russian three-quarters of her wild family tree, but she knew next to nothing about them. She didn't give much thought to the past, being content with the present, with all its bustle – and with herself, exactly as she was.

Elizaveta Bestuzheva knew her own world quite well. It was mainly an internal rather than external matter, an easy subject for analysis, though she did her best not to indulge too much in self-contemplation. Things were occasionally confused in her mind, but the important stuff was undeniably clear: she knew she held an entire universe inside her, replete with heavenly bodies. Some of her planets were inhabited, and she could hear the voices of all the countless creatures who lived there. Sometimes, the voices tortured her; sometimes, they made her irrationally happy. They resonated in her heart with joy and anxiety, and in her body with its unique physiology, as well. To Elizaveta, hers was the best of all possible worlds.

She noticed others who carried their own inner universes, which doubtless seemed just as perfect to their owners. Of course, this complicated life considerably: that's why, she told herself, signals from one individual to another often got scrambled and were bound to be misinterpreted. They encountered so much interference, how could a message reach its target without distortion? Not to mention that everyone thought in a different language... People were utterly wretched when it came to communicating meanings. She could hardly believe they understood each other at all. It took tremendous effort to concentrate on an external stimulus, to capture Morse code or some other cipher, let alone translate it into words.

She was considerate of others' weaknesses, aware they could be hiding the complexities of their own private spaces. People valued her compassion – though she was callous with those whose worlds were empty, not bothering to hide her boredom. This wasn't malice on her part. She didn't think she was better than anyone else – it just happened that way. The Morse code got lost in the vacuum with no hope of a reply. Unfortunately, most men she knew were carriers of this vacuous, non-resonating space.

It must be said that unlike the implacable Margot, Elizaveta harbored no ill will toward the stronger sex. She believed love was the most important thing in life – in the traditional, old-fashioned sense. It was a conscious challenge, a notion of extreme romanticism she inherited from her Polish grandma or from some nameless Russian ancestor with a passionate heart and a sentimental nature.

There was a contradiction here: between the external and the internal, between a declaration of self-sufficiency and the expectation of a fateful encounter. Sometimes, Elizaveta asked herself resentfully, is her precious inner world really alive? Full as it was of life-giving juices and warm plasma, was it all just a lie, since she still pinned all her hopes on simple happiness?

She recognized her emerging impulses, unchecked and capable of surprising anyone, but she needed help to awaken them and set them free. When flirting with men, she tested their courage in hopes that their shameless gaze would help her find something deep within herself. At times, she was ready to sacrifice almost anything, even the scattering of her internal galaxies encased in perfect form, for a moment of insight. What if she could eventually just toss the fragile structure up into the air and then fail to catch it? Let it crash, let it splinter into shards of glass?

This thought scared her. It was distressing to think that somewhere inside this warm plasma the gears of negation and decay were ticking away. Maybe one day she would meet someone – a man who would determine how far they could both tumble into madness... This, of course, left ample room for fantasies. Elizaveta was a big fan of fantasies. Still, she had no doubt that, when reality caught up with her, she would meet it with dignity and not miss her chance.

She had learned all she knew about love from the books that filled her parents' home, crammed onto shelves that stretched from floor to ceiling. Elizaveta spent her childhood buried in their pages. Nobody bothered her; her older brother lived his own adult life and her parents had their own problems: the Bestuzhev family was not a happy one. Her father worked at Intertrade, and though he had been considered quite a catch back in the Soviet era, he had married a modest waitress, to the surprise of his friends and relatives. He had his own motive: complete, unquestioned authority, and that was what he got – along with the opportunity to demean his wife over the course of many years. But the children knew full well that, in actuality, their mother was secretly in charge. And then the father died, still young, from a rare bug he caught on a business trip to Africa.

On her diet of books, Elizaveta grew into a young lady resembling Turgenev's heroines. She loved Kuprin, cried over bad poems she spent hours reading in the local park, and shunned all displays of rudeness. Soon, however, the wild nineties shook up the values in her pretty head. Her older brother began to work for a living, curse profusely, and smoke pot. Her friends landed men with secondhand German cars, and she fell in with the leader of a

local gang. As a result, she finally lost her virginity at nineteen, blushing at such outrageous conservatism.

Then the century came to an end. Elizaveta mourned her gangbanger as he found himself in a cemetery, befitting the career he had chosen. She did her time at university, got her completely pointless degree, and moved out on her own, despite her disapproving mother and brother. They had no genuine connection after that. She grew more distant, refusing their advice and money. Finally, her brother left for another continent. Her mother sold the flat and joined him. And Elizaveta felt truly free.

Her first marriage soon followed. It came on a fleeting, feverish whim and left no trace when it ended. The man she had chosen proved to be a nobody: a mediocrity, a total waste. She quickly grew tired of him and breathed a sigh of relief when she found an excuse to kick him out.

After a bout of severe self-pity, she befriended a certain Sara, with a hazy past and a streak of bright red hair. Sara was inclined to extremes, and something in her entranced Elizaveta, especially the glinting edge of the narrow switchblade with which she was never parted. They invented game after game, and Elizaveta forgot her troubles. She would often daydream about the blade that tasted so many secret parts of her body – along with Sara's playful tongue and her own sweet shame. No one had ever been so maniacally jealous about her – and this only fueled the fascination. Then Sara disappeared, leaving suddenly for the Altai Mountains, and Elizaveta knew the worst was behind her. She was ready to get on with her life.

A few well-mannered, mature lovers helped her fully reclaim her confidence. The desire for fire and passion quickly returned, but they proved elusive despite her cheerful disposition and energetic search. As a result, Elizaveta's personal life was reduced to compromise and a quest to satisfy her lust. This held its own brand of passion: risky and shameless, with a sharp, musky aftertaste. Her outward detachment would give way to a surge of stormy intensity; she seemed to break free of her cage, growing unrestrained and insatiable. It had little to do with crude sensuality; the nature of these whirlwinds that tossed her about was much deeper and subtler. Elizaveta had no name for it, but with a bit of work, she could convince herself it was the energy of love.

Time passed, and nothing changed. One by one, her girlfriends started families of their own. Elizaveta held no grudge: she knew a different fate awaited her, and it should not be rushed.

Men fell for her, flocking like corpulent moths to her wicked glow and silent call. Eventually, however, she grew up and became stingier with her charms. She was tired of variety; the ranks of her admirers thinned out, and only a lucky few were granted permanent status. And yet she couldn't develop respect even for them. The hollow vacuum they personified didn't resonate on any frequency, made no echo on any wavelength, yielded no light or word. At first, she resented them, but eventually they became merely amusing. She

accepted it as fact that in her country, the stronger sex was much worse than the weaker. This knowledge helped her reconcile with reality, providing a common ground for isolated episodes. Having an answer made life easier: she watched with a smile, even a sort of maternal concern, as her lovers moved about the room, gestured, squared their shoulders, and threw furtive glances at the mirror; as they tried to put on airs and take up more space; as they ate, drank and smoked, simulated thoughtfulness, and studiously knitted their brows, only to dive with relief back into familiar patterns, from house chores to sex to driving. She knew the real value of their lies and insinuations, their vague promises and frequent whining. She knew how easy it was to confuse them, to knock them right off their feet, to flatter them into giving her what she wanted, to get them to talk or to fall silent with doubt. She held power over them, yet she didn't much like this power. Control over events offered convenience, but when things didn't work out, she took it lightly, refusing to get sucked into an argument and feeling no regret.

Her latest lover was going on six months. Bestuzheva valued his devotion – a quality that had gradually worked its way to the top of her updated priorities. He was easy to deal with, so he would probably be a convenient life partner, but she knew that was something they would never get to test out. This chapter, too, was coming to an end. In the mornings that followed their stormy nights, she could barely contain her hostility, looking at the bustling “Sasha,” as he'd taken to calling himself to please her. His obedient stare caused her nothing but irritation and disgust. She even began to hate this diminutive nickname, and after a few insulting outbursts, “Sasha” turned into a gloomy “Alexander,” all tangled up in consonants. After that, she tried to avoid the name altogether. At least she didn't have to say *that* out loud.

Alexander was well liked by her friends, including Masha and a few old classmates. This used to flatter her; now, it was another source of irritation. Yet, generally, Elizaveta didn't care what anyone thought. She'd long realized that every opinion was one-sided in its own way – and besides, you could never expect to hear the truth. Everyone chased their own private goals, and she knew herself what a goal could mean – a clear, well-defined one, something doable within given deadlines. She had a whole list of them that she loved to inspect while drifting off to sleep – taking inventory and outlining new horizons. At those times, many things would fall neatly into place – many, but not all. Some matters stood apart, defying every kind of list; they beguiled her with their elusiveness and remained a permanent dream.

Chapter 2

Noticing Masha's disappointment, Elizaveta sorted the office mail and switched on her computer. The inbox was almost empty, but one e-mail caught her attention. "Fortunate!" the subject line blared. This was quite strange. Elizaveta glanced at the bouquet, feeling out of sorts, clicked on the message, and began searching for meaning in the tiny symbols that comprised the image on the screen.

"Masha, check this out..." She was about to wave her co-worker over, but the screen suddenly sprang to life. The symbols swirled, danced, and settled into the shape of a large heart. It turned crimson.

"What?" Masha said, looking up, but Bestuzheva waved hastily at her, "Nothing, nothing," feeling a blush creep across her cheeks.

The words "Click this!" appeared on the screen. She poked it obediently with the mouse pointer, and the heart was replaced with a list of short commands.

It was a formula for calculating her "Soul Number" – at least that's what the bold-face heading said. Intrigued, Elizaveta followed the instructions twice to make sure she made no mistakes in the calculations, and typed the result into the box at the bottom, above the *Decode* button. She didn't have to wait long: "Your number is SIX," the screen blinked. "Your sign is VENUS. Your stone is DIAMOND. Your nature is LOVE, MOTHERHOOD, DOMESTIC BLISS."

The words disappeared and the heart returned, only to disintegrate into shards and dissolve into nothing. Elizaveta tried to bring the image back, but to no avail. The e-mail refused to come to life again, giving her nothing but a scrambled row of symbols.

Bestuzheva felt unreasonably sad. She glanced at the bouquet again, as if it could give her a hint. When that didn't come, she shook her head and leaned back in her chair, thinking about her morning, her Soul Number, and her entire life.

She languished like this for the rest of the day and left work with a headache, irritated at everything. The bookstalls had disappeared and fruit dealers, southerners with oily eyes, had taken their place. Elizaveta got a fleeting sense of the transience of her surroundings, with the office and her apartment providing the only tenuous stability. She walked downstairs, crossed the square, and headed slowly down Bolshaya Lubyanka, shaded by the famous edifice that still oozed menace and struck inexplicable fear into some people's hearts.

Elizaveta wasn't affected by the granite building or any other specters of the Soviet epoch she barely caught and had no reason to take seriously. Moscow boasted brand-new values, and Bestuzheva was quite content with them – especially since she didn't have a choice. She turned toward Kuznetsky Bridge, which sparkled with boutique shop windows, and headed toward Tverskaya Street. The high-end stores neither she nor most of her fellow citizens could afford had long ago lost their allure. Her eyes glided absently across expensive

clothes, bedding, and accessories illuminated by brilliant lights, safe behind thick glass. Next was a row of jewelry stores. Elizaveta slowed her pace, thinking back to the diamond from the morning e-mail, but felt suddenly ashamed and sped up again with a slightly arrogant expression on her face.

The workday was coming to an end, and Kuznetsky Bridge was packed with pedestrians. Elizaveta noted with annoyance that they all looked alike, like drops of wax or some other liquid that easily shifted form. It was some kind of trick, she felt, an offensive injustice, though she couldn't tell how or why it should be different. The setting sun, along with reflections of other people's lives, diluted and distorted the figures around her, making them seem unremarkable, nearly incorporeal. They glided back and forth like shadows or characters from hastily written novels, their movements guided by the simplest of instincts and needs. Their desires, ambitions, and problems were all too predictable. The city had given them a respite and they submitted to it, just as they had succumbed to the burdens of their workday: the rudeness of their bosses, the headaches and accusations, bad food at the nearest coffee shop. They lacked something crucial, and Bestuzheva didn't want to put a word to that something; naming it would only make things more depressing. She felt like a foreigner to all of them, an alien from another planet, though she quickly reminded herself that this sentiment was fleeting and she would eventually have to grow up.

"Eventually, but not now," she mumbled. "You lucked out, gorgeous!" With secret satisfaction, she thought there could be no other way. And that "gorgeous" no doubt defined her very well.

Beyond the Rozhdestvenskaya Street intersection, the Kuznetsky went downhill, literally and figuratively. Boutiques gave way to regular stores and cafés. Elizaveta entered one of them, named after a Hindu god, and ordered a citrus smoothie.

She sat and watched the bustle outside. The structure across the street housed the embassy of some newly minted country, irrelevant and largely unessential. The store next to it offered foreign trinkets. Farther down the street, the once-famous Writers' Bookstore now sold postcards and souvenirs, its only window blocked by a billboard advertising cranberry lipstick. The advertising slogan, like the taste of a lingering kiss, reminded Elizaveta of last night, which left nothing but fatigue and frustration.

Suddenly, her back prickled with cold goose bumps again. She felt she was being watched from somewhere nearby. Elizaveta craned her neck – abruptly, angrily – to catch the interloper, then leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "My nerves are completely fried," she complained in a whisper. "I'm just imagining crap."

She was mistaken: her suspicion was not unfounded. From a reasonable distance, a nondescript man was watching her every move.

Earlier that morning, he could be glimpsed outside the gray house on Solyanka – and everywhere else Elizaveta went. He followed her like a relentless shadow.

The nondescript man was a private investigator. His first assignment was to give the subject a hint of his presence, but not so much that she could spot her pursuer or even be sure she was being tailed. So far, he had lived up to his reputation and carried out the task brilliantly. He didn't know the client; all he had been told was that the man was from out of town. That was enough to fill him with sympathy for Elizaveta, caught by misfortune in the web of some provincial fat cat.

But the fat cat was far from provincial: born on Ordynka, he'd spent his first twenty-seven years in Moscow. Had the PI known this, his remorse for Elizaveta's plight might have morphed into solidarity with a fellow Muscovite. On this account, though, he would have also been wrong. Contrary to stereotypes, the client had an enduring hatred for Moscow.

His name was Timofey Timofeyevich Tsarkov. Once upon a time, he had been one of Bestuzheva's classmates: a poor student who got his education somewhat late in life, after a youth wasted on black-market dealings, amateur rock, and a stint in the army. Through it all, he never lost his optimism and easygoing nature. One day, their eyes met over flasks and Bunsen burners – they got to talking, then to urgent groping between the sheets, and then to infatuation and fervent passion. Elizaveta fell for him like a teenager, with a wide-open heart, and he loved her youth and vigor. Yet their romance was short-lived. The city dealt Timofey a mortal offense, and his life changed forever.

It was the slippery road that did it. Timofey's car skidded and crashed into an expensive Jeep. The two vehicles drifted across the highway, hitting a few others along the way. Miraculously, there were no injuries in the ensuing pile-up except the totaled cars. As Tsarkov, slight and skinny, climbed out of his demolished ride, the owner of the Jeep stomped over, tossed Elizaveta aside, ignoring her terrified squeal, and smashed his fist into Timofey's face, hard enough to give him a serious concussion.

In the hospital, he realized he could no longer live like this. He lost interest in college, friends, and Elizaveta Bestuzheva. His life narrowed to a single point: the desire to take vengeance on the world. He wanted to do it with the same weapons the world had used against him: brutal force, money and power, and a right to be cruel. His uncompromising nature set a high bar for his future endeavor. But he was a reasonable man and knew he couldn't reach his goal in the capital – he had neither the cash, nor, more importantly, the connections. And so Timofey Tsarkov's heart hardened with a bone-deep loathing of Moscow.

During the first two days of his hospitalization, Elizaveta barely left his side. But he was sullen, distant, burdened by her presence. She got upset, and her visits grew infrequent. Then, right before he was discharged, Timofey had a quickie with one of the nurses, which he admitted to Bestuzheva with secret relish. He couldn't forgive her for witnessing his disgrace; he wanted to punish her, and he succeeded: they ended on a very bad note. Soon after, he dropped out of school and fell completely off the radar.

Having disposed of his past and made his present a blank slate, Timofey moved to Ekaterinburg, closer to his uncle, a jeweler. He found no overnight success and the uncle proved to be a real scoundrel. Eventually, however, fate smiled upon him. As is often the case, fortune came in an unexpected package.

One day, he did something he had never done before: he approached an unconscious man lying helplessly just outside a bus stop. To his surprise, there was no smell of alcohol. Timofey flagged down a cab, took the guy to the hospital, and, as it turned out, saved him from almost certain death.

The man happened to be an out-of-town hot shot with business interests all up and down the Volga. He had come to the Urals incognito on highly personal business, and it had nearly cost him his life: on his morning walk, he had an epileptic seizure and lost consciousness. The physicians said this was caused by a nervous disorder, combined with a congenital vascular defect. Without immediate treatment, the seizure might have killed him.

Within two days, the patient was patched up and discharged. He carefully recorded the obscure diagnosis in his notebook, said a few choice words about his hometown doctors, who were obviously in for a severe punishment, and headed to the nearest church to donate all his cash. When he returned to his native Sivoldaisk, he took Timofey along as his personal aide.

That was seven years ago. Working side by side, Timofey Tsarkov and his *patrón* didn't waste any time. The *patrón* moved into local government, where he was even more at liberty to do as he pleased. Timofey, in the meantime, discovered in himself an aptitude for financial scheming and built his own little "outfit," as he liked to call it. His assets were quickly approaching the levels he'd once conceived of in his hospital bed.

Disaster, like good fortune, came out of nowhere, in the form of the *patrón's* daughter, who had suddenly grown up. Her zealous father wanted nothing but the best for his child and had long been exploring various matrimonial prospects. But then, his "little girl" – who, at twenty-something, became a burly Russian matron, dressed to the nines and accustomed to denying herself nothing – took matters into her own hands. All of a sudden, she fell head over heels for Tsarkov, whom she'd known since she was a giggly kid with freckles and a ponytail.

Now that she was an adult, she scared him. She embodied a thousand devils, a handful of hardened bitches, and Albert Einstein adapted to the Russian plains. She was stronger, smarter, and more ruthless than anyone he knew. Her temper terrified everyone around her. Timofey imagined she could probably bite her lover's head clean off like a female praying mantis. Plus, he didn't like chubby women. In other words, catastrophe loomed on his horizon, and all his senses screamed to get away.

After the first failed attempt to lure her would-be husband into bed, the daughter, Maya, marched into her father's office and demanded a wedding. "Love will come later," she

explained. “That’s how everyone does it these days.” And, really, who could resist a treasure like her?

Nobody, her father agreed, slightly dazed by her onslaught. Placated for the moment, Maya took off for Cleveland on a cultural exchange program, tasking her parents with making all the arrangements. She was scheduled to return in three months or so. The first month was nearly over, and Timofey realized this delay – a generous gift from the gods – was his only chance of escape.

His *patrón* called him in for a man-to-man talk. Both chose their words carefully. In a shrewdly perceptive move, Timofey brought a modicum of ambiguity into the situation. He was suitably incomprehensible and mysterious, alluding to some vague events from his past he couldn’t talk about just yet. His speech was peppered with “honor” and “duty,” words that resonated in the heart of his *patrón*, a member of the old guard, shaped by obsolete rules. The conversation resolved nothing. It only proved that both parties had serious intentions and the hapless bridegroom was in for hard times.

If Timofey was going to defy the dangerous clan, he needed a damn good reason. His *patrón*’s bruised pride – not to mention the fury of the rejected Maya – could crush him like a bug. He could tell them he was into men, but that wouldn’t work in Russia’s backwoods; no one would ever shake his hand, let alone do business with him again. He was left with just one option: he quickly had to arrange an alternative marriage – a retroactive and sufficiently credible one. He put everything else on hold and dove headfirst into this project.

Finding a fake spouse proved to be a hard task. Timofey needed someone he could trust completely, and, mulling over the candidates’ credentials, he felt increasingly hopeless. He knew plenty of women – now he saw them from a new perspective and even thought he had treated many of them unfairly, with little regard. But still, they were local, living in plain view, with pedestrian biographies, transparent right down to their birth. There was no way he could change that. He needed an outsider, but all his old contacts were gone. What was he supposed to do – invite a stranger, the first one who came along, to join this delicate and cunning game?

Timofey was close to despair, but then a brilliant thought occurred to him. He congratulated himself and breathed a sigh of relief. His salvation might not be a slam dunk, but he certainly had a chance.

He had to marry Elizaveta Bestuzheva, who fit nearly all the parts of the profile. She knew how to hold on to secrets, knew how to keep her word – he just had to press her into making a promise. Unlike almost everyone else, she was honest and incapable of deceit. Timofey had a soft spot for sincere people: he never failed to be surprised they hadn’t gone extinct.

Yet she was stubborn, and that could be a serious problem. He saw that clearly, thinking back to the turmoil of their breakup seven years ago. Still, he had no other avenue of

retreat. He had to bank on Elizaveta's big heart and romantic nature – and his own charm and skill – to get his way.

It took him a single night to come up with a detailed plan. It might seem too intricate to idle eyes, but Timofey disdained easy solutions. He always relied on complicated schemes, and they miraculously paid off, to the surprise of his hardheaded partners. His customary tactics relied on piling up a heap of accidents until they grew into a clear inevitability – or at least into the likeness of one. Inevitability was something you couldn't argue with – this was the secret of success. And so, armed with an understanding of causation, Tsarkov made bold decisions and knew no doubts.

He approached his pre-existing marriage plan in the same way. Unseen patterns began to swirl around Elizaveta, building a chain of disparate events that moved along the same vector, aimed at the spot soon to be occupied by Timofey himself.

The private eye, who stood motionless behind the door of an office building catty-corner to Elizaveta's café, was unaware of the plan's complexities – he was merely the man on the ground. He felt compassion for the young woman who was obviously headed into trouble, but it didn't stop him from doing his job as best he could. He didn't mind bringing emotions into his thankless business; he even cultivated them. At times, he felt pity for his assignments; at other times, he hated or disdained them. This helped him bear the inconveniences of his work and provided comfort in the dark days of blunders and failures. Not that those were common. He was highly respected in certain circles and had no shortage of clients.

The PI glanced at his watch, pushed a button on his cell phone, and said a few words to the person on the other end. A minute later, a girl in leggings and a pink top ran out of the neighboring building and trotted up Kuznetsky, holding a large rose wrapped in tinfoil. Her provocative appearance drew everyone's attention. Passersby turned to stare; patrons of the open-air café gaped at her in shock.

She made a sharp turn to stop directly in front of Elizaveta and handed her the rose with an old-fashioned curtsey. The flower was the same color as the morning bouquet, but bigger and more vibrant.

“For you,” the girl said, peering into the irises of Elizaveta's eyes. “Just one, but it looks like a ruby. The diamond – that's for later.” Her face diffused into a cunning grin, and Elizaveta realized she wasn't as young as she seemed.

“What is this?” Elizaveta asked, bewildered. The girl simply smiled again, giving Elizaveta's palm a quick caress with her cold hand, and ran off at full speed, melting into the crowd.

Elizaveta sighed, shrugged, and set the rose on the table. Completely baffled, she was oblivious to the fact that all eyes were on her. A plump waitress brought the bill and stared with undisguised curiosity. Elizaveta suddenly felt sad. Tears stung her eyelids. She paid the

bill; grabbed the rose, pricking her finger on a sharp thorn, left the café and headed quickly toward Tverskaya.

Half an hour later, she sat on the couch in her small apartment on Gnezdnikovsky Lane, staring at the flower that now jutted from the narrow neck of a vase. “I am Venus, my stone is diamond,” she whispered as if trying to cast a spell against some alien force that had invaded her life.