



# GREG WILSON

Corruption, betrayal, death ... Welcome to the New Russia

# THE DOMINO GAME

"A knife-edge thriller"  
MELBOURNE AGE

**GREG WILSON**

**THE DOMINO  
GAME**

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to any real person - whether living or dead - is purely  
coincidental.

*Visit the Author's Website: [www.GregWilsonBooks.com](http://www.GregWilsonBooks.com)*

## MEDIA REVIEWS OF “THE DOMINO GAME”

*“A knife edge thriller... a sophisticated, action-packed and energetically written novel that cries out to be made into a film. A real page-turner.”*

MELBOURNE AGE

*“A bracing and spirited page-turner.”*

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

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SUNSHINE COAST SUNDAY

*For Vicki... Where would I be without you?*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# PART ONE

# 1

MOSCOW

May 1995

IT WAS AN elegant house. Set back behind an elaborate stone fence that separated its grounds from the pavement of Ulitsa Prechistenka, one of those genteel, tree-lined avenues just south of the Arbat, once favored by the nobility then subsequently forgotten in the frantic struggle towards Soviet greatness. Now, four years on from the collapse of the Union, the neighborhood had already begun to recover its former stature as a fashionable address. It was one of those rare havens in the city where

time seemed to have stood still. A place where the elite could once again feel comfortably secure.

Its form was early Empire style. Similar to the English Georgian, but with that unique Russian flamboyance. Ornate lintels above tall windows in a facade freshly and boldly painted the color of ripe peach; a row of six grand columns at the center, glistening like white icing in the late afternoon sun.

“So then, Niko...”

Vari Vlasenko paused, probing his tongue between his front teeth, making a peculiar sucking sound as he attempted to dislodge a thread of food he had discovered trapped between them. He shifted in his seat, gave up with his tongue and began digging around in his mouth with a fingernail instead, finally capturing his quarry, inspecting it, then flicking it over his shoulder somewhere into the back of the parked Volga. He sniffed with satisfaction and returned to his thought. “How much you think he paid for this shack?”

Nikolai Aven glanced up from the file he was studying.

“Rubles or dollars?”

“*Pssht!*” Vari gave a derisive snort. “The only ones who talk rubles now are the pricks on the top floor of Lubyanka who set our pay.”

Nikolai nursed a smile. Vari was right. Practically no one dealt, or even thought, in rubles any longer. He shrugged. “A million. Two, maybe. Who knows?” He began to turn his attention back to the manila folder in his lap.

Vari let out a growl of disgust. “Aach!”

He clutched the steering wheel, staring ahead vacantly, his square, fleshy face washed with a forlorn expression. “This used to be a proud neighborhood, Niko. Davydov, Orlov, Vyazemsky... they all lived here once, you know?”

Nikolai knew who he meant, of course. *The Decembrists*. The band of military heroes whose well-intentioned attempts at reform had come to grief in the ill-fated uprising against Nicholas I, back in 1825. In a roundabout way he and Vari had *The Decembrists* to thank for the jobs they both held today since, having scared the wits out of the nobility, it was *The Decembrists'* rebellion that had led to the establishment of the loftily titled Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Chancellery, the state's first secret police. The Third Section had evolved into the more sophisticated *Okhrana* and then, of course, the Bolsheviks had seized power and set up their own infamous *Chekha*, which – given its viciousness – had made its tsarist forerunners seem

relatively benevolent institutions. Where they had been mainly preoccupied with social engineering, the purpose of the *Chekha* had been unambiguous – *the elimination of all non-approved social categories* – with its officers empowered to use whatever means they considered necessary to achieve those ends.

After a time the *Chekha* had become the *NKVD* which in turn had metamorphosed into the *KGB* which – following a remarkably successful run – had finally overplayed its hand by conspiring against Gorbachev in the attempted coup of 1991. That indiscretion had led to its being dismantled and replaced eighteen months ago by what was now known as the *FSB* – the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. Which was where Nikolai Aven and his partner, Vari Vlasenko, now worked as Senior Investigators in the Directorate of Economic Crimes.

“You see, down there?” Vari stabbed a thick finger towards another elaborate mansion further along the street. Nikolai’s gaze followed. “That’s where that American woman lived. You know. The dancer.”

“Isadora Duncan,” Nikolai offered.

Vari nodded. “Isadora Duncan.” He lingered over the syllables. “What a woman, eh, Niko? And she married Sergei Yesenin, the revolutionary poet.” He shook his

head sadly. “All great people, and now what has it come to?” He snorted in derision, answering his own question. “Now the jackals have taken over the city.”

Sergei Yesenin, Nikolai reflected. Now there was a name that brought back memories.

At school in St Petersburg – Leningrad, as it had been known then – Niko and his fellow students had been taught to memorize long tracts of Yesenin’s idealistic poetry to the point where he had found himself beginning to become quite obsessed by its themes. Then one day he had taken himself on a solitary pilgrimage to visit the room at the Hotel Angleterre where the thirty year old Yesenin had hanged himself and it was standing there, in that room, that he had suddenly realized how dangerous an obsession idealism could become. He turned to his partner.

‘Sergei Yesenin was a petulant egotist who was hooked on alcohol and cocaine.’

“Aach!” Vari tossed his hands in the air in disgust. “You miss the point. He was a great peasant philosopher!”

Nikolai pondered the response. Apparently, as far as Vari was concerned, being a great peasant philosopher excused such excess. He turned back to the folder and studied the grainy black and white photograph of Marat

Ivankov once again, comparing it with the profile information pasted inside the cover.

*Born Yesenino - Ryazan Province, Central Russia  
- August 1952.*

*Yesenino. An interesting coincidence. Same place  
as Sergei Yesenin.*

*1952. That made Ivankov forty-two now, going  
on forty-three. A decade younger than Vari; a  
decade older than himself.*

*School in Yesenino. Degree in Economics (First  
Class) University of Lvov.*

*1973–1975. Junior Economic Analyst. Defense  
Ministry, Moscow.*

*1975. Enlisted as Officer Kadet, Soviet Armed  
Forces (Army). Training at Frunze Military  
Academy, Moscow.*

Now there was something to think about. Why would someone with a degree in Economics and a safe political job at the Defense Ministry decide to join the Soviet Army? Another peasant idealist, perhaps? Nikolai thought not.

*1976–1988. Served Eastern Europe (Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria) Kaliningrad and Trans-Caucasus, rising to rank of Major before final posting: Afghanistan Occupation Force (1986–1988).*

*Retired Military Service 1988 and returned Moscow. Established private security and procurement consultancy, ZAVOSET.*

*Nikolai glanced across the street at the brass plaque fixed to the stone column at the right of the tall, ornate black and gold gates. Read the single engraved word: ZAVOSET.*

*1988–1991. Little available information on activities.*

*1991 to present. ZAVOSET emerges as major investor in a range of privatizations of previously state-owned enterprises.*

Nikolai felt the light tap of Vari's knuckles against his thigh. "Hey. Take a look."

He looked up in time to see a black BMW saloon – 7 Series – turning into the driveway.

Vari felt around for the camera in the well between the two front seats, lifted it to his eye with one hand and clicked the shutter twice in quick succession as the gates

began to open. Nikolai watched as a tall, broad-shouldered young man in an immaculately tailored charcoal suit stepped forward and leaned down to the driver's window. Blond hair, razor cut, a thin black leash wrapped around his wrist. The Doberman attached to the other end of the strap sauntered around the man's legs and took up an arrogant stance beside him, surveying the street. The animal's pale yellow eyes came to rest on the Volga and its occupants and hung there, calm, observing.

Vari shuddered. "Jesus, I hate those things." He set the camera down again and nodded towards the Doberman's handler. "Ex-Spetsnaz. It doesn't matter what clothes you hang on them, you can tell the bastards anywhere."

Nikolai's eyes tracked across to the man beside the car as he stepped back and straightened up, moving with the controlled grace characteristic of Special Forces training. The BMW started forward through the gates and the man turned to follow, but the Doberman held its ground. Its handler paused, following the animal's gaze back to the Volga, smiled lightly then turned away again, tugging once at the leash, bringing the animal to heel behind him.

Nikolai scooped a pen and pad from the broad plastic dashboard, made a note of the BMW's license

number then flicked to a printed list at the back of the folder and began comparing while Vari watched him expectantly.

“No match,” he finally announced. He let the pages fall back into place.

Vari pursed his lips. “Another strand in the web. I’ll run a check when we get back to the office.” He glanced back at Nikolai again. “They know we’re here. You realize that, don’t you?”

Nikolai shrugged. “So what?”

“So!” Vari slammed the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. “It makes me want to puke, that’s what! Ten years ago if they’d seen us sitting out here in a black Volga they would have been shivering in their shoes. Now they have bigger and better cars than we do and they think they can just stand there in their Armani suits and smirk at us.” He drew an incensed breath through his nose. “I tell you, Niko, there are times when I think things were better in the old days. Back then who we were used to count for something. At least when I worked for the KGB, I didn’t need permission to wear my balls to work!”

Nikolai contained a smile. With almost thirty years in the service Vari was about as old guard as they got without becoming extinct. Not quite a dinosaur, yet close. But then Vari came from Ukrainian Cossack stock. With

his heavy squat torso and thick moustache he even looked like a Cossack and the Cossacks were nothing if not survivors. Respectful of order and authority, but unafraid when the time came to make a stand. It was common knowledge within the Bureau that back in 1991, when Yeltsin had barricaded himself in the White House after the conservatives had isolated Gorbachev in his Crimean *dacha* in an attempt to wrest back control, Vari Vlasenko had been one of the first to take to the streets to defy them. Given that more than half the KGB had been on the other side at the time, that *would* have taken balls, although whether he had acted out of idealism or pragmatism still remained an open question. Whatever his motivation, by backing the winning side Vari had ended up a survivor, which said a lot for his instincts.

Vari had been assigned as Nikolai's partner on the first day he had reported for work with the Bureau. Nikolai presumed his superiors had concluded he needed an experienced minder to keep him out of trouble, and they were probably right. What Vari had thought about this arrangement he kept to himself, although it was reasonably apparent that he was less than impressed since, on one early occasion, Nikolai had overheard him mumbling on the telephone – presumably to some acquaintance with empathy for his situation – something

about *babysitting*, as he threw a glance in Nikolai's direction. Since Vari's marriage had been in recess for fifteen years and since, by his own admission, he had no children that he knew of, the meaning hadn't been difficult to follow.

Whatever his frustrations may have been, on a face-to-face basis at least, Vari had managed a veneer of courtesy towards his apprentice, although he had plainly remained skeptical for some time about the relevance of Nikolai's background to his newly chosen career. But over time it had worked out, the relationship between them gradually laminated layer by layer into a bond of mutual respect.

Nikolai clapped his partner's arm.

"Relax, old friend. I've told you before, it's a new game so we have to play it by new rules."

Vari swung around, regarding Nikolai dubiously, his thick neck straining against an undersized collar. "You think so, do you? Don't pretend you are dumber than you really are. You ask me, there's only way to deal with a leach like Ivankov and it starts with him waking up with a headache in a suite at the Hotel Lubyanka."

Nikolai chuckled. "Do I detect a trace of the old Soviet stirring within you? Come on my friend, we're supposed to be a new, enlightened species now. I know

it's frustrating but you must have patience. Our objectives are the same. We just differ a little on the means of achieving them."

Vari grunted and turned away, staring ahead through the windshield.

"Species evolve, Niko, they don't change overnight. Old instincts die hard, little brother." His gaze slid sideways. "You would do well to remember that."

A silent moment passed between them before Nikolai swung his attention back to the dossier in his lap.

Despite their age difference, Marat Ivankov's career and Nikolai's own seemed to have passed each other heading in different directions.

Marat Ivankov, the obviously gifted and promising academic, had – after a brief stint with the bureaucracy – elected for some indeterminate reason to switch to a career in the Soviet military with all of its attendant hardships and risks (not to mention lousy pay). Then, after a dozen years in the army, and just a year before the Berlin Wall had tumbled, almost as if anticipating the start of the Union's collapse, he had abruptly abandoned that course and embarked on another, returning to Moscow to set up business in a single rented room at the Hotel Arbat. As a "security and procurement consultant" whatever that meant. Hardly, one would have thought,

the kind of business that offered the promise of rich rewards.

As the file recorded there was little information available on his activities in the three years between 1988 and 1991 when the Union had finally imploded, save for the fact that he had operated his apparently modest business from that same small office while he lived unassumingly in an equally small apartment just a few blocks removed. But then, in the four short years that had followed – during which practically everyone else in Russia had gone backwards – Marat Ivankov had prospered, and prospered conspicuously, to a truly remarkable degree. To the extent that today he appeared, at least, to be the sole proprietor of an enterprise with an astonishing range of interests in fields as diverse as chemical manufacturing and nightclubs, aviation parts and real estate. Had offices and homes in both Paris and London as well as Moscow. Maintained a fleet of expensive luxury vehicles – and women. And was constantly but discreetly shielded by a small, private army.

In short, Marat Ivankov was now a fully-fledged, guilt-edged *New Russian Oligarch*, as his genre had come to be called, and thus an undisputed member of the Moscow social and business A-list.

Well, at least the education was something they had

in common.

While Ivankov was driving a tank around Poland, Nikolai had been studying for his own degree in Economics from the University of Leningrad. Then while Ivankov was chasing the Mujaheddin around the mountains of Afghanistan, he had been taking his second degree – at Moscow State University, this time – in Political Science, following which, in 1987, at twenty-five, he had been astonishingly fortunate enough to land a job with a Moscow-based affiliate of the giant US bank, Morgan Stanley. And it had been while he was working there that he had met, fallen head over heels for and, two years later, married his beautiful Natalia.

Insulated by their love for one another and Nikolai's generous US-dollar pay check, he and Natalia had managed to navigate the tumultuous post-Perestroika swells in relative comfort until, early in 1993 they had sailed into a frightening and unsettling encounter with reality.

Larisa, their daughter, had just turned two when they first noticed the bruising. Natalia had thought that the little girl had seemed listless over the previous few weeks but then, as a first time mother, also wondered if perhaps she was overreacting. More than likely it was just some harmless virus. Now, staring at the bruises, Natalia's

instincts told her otherwise and, for the first time in her life, as she reached for the phone to call Nikolai, she felt the cold slither of uncontrollable fear.

The diagnosis left them both stunned.

Acute lymphoblastic leukemia. A disease which, without immediate treatment, the doctors told them, could be life-threatening. But with the correct management of Larisa's condition the chances of a full recovery were good. 75 per cent or even higher, although the treatment and the drugs would be expensive, and even assuming they did prove effective, it would be more than five years before they could be certain.

Nikolai and Natalia were fortunate. They had the money. And Nikolai's American employers stood behind them all the way, insisting that Nikolai take whatever time from work he needed without any reduction in pay. In fact, on one occasion they had even flown in an emergency supply of *L-asparaginase* from France, at company expense, when the Republican Children's Hospital had run out and would have no funds to order more of the drug for at least another month.

The treatment went well and after ten weeks Larisa was already showing remarkable signs of recovery. Tests indicated that the disease was in remission and the doctors – who, following Chernobyl, were now experts in this

field – advanced her regime to what they called consolidation therapy.

Larisa, thank God, seemed to be out of danger and Natalia, too, had recovered well from the initial devastating shock, but something about the experience had changed Nikolai forever.

They *had* the money; that was what had made the difference for Larisa.

But now Nikolai found it impossible to clear from his mind the images of the dozens of other children they had encountered in the wards of the hospitals and the waiting rooms of the clinics. Children whose parents were not so fortunate and many of whom – for that cruel reason – would languish and die in those terrifyingly strange and sterile surroundings.

That was what had deflected Nikolai's career from its previous stable course. He had suddenly realized just how fortunate he really was.

When measured by comparative standards his assets were enormous. An excellent education; a prestigious and highly paid job; a pleasant apartment in a nice part of the city with good furniture bought and paid for; a wonderful, loving wife and a beautiful baby daughter. As for liabilities, the only one he could think of was

intangible yet immense: up until this point he had never even considered investing for the future.

Not money: he wasn't worried about that. What this was about was investing in the *real* future: the future of Russia. The country where his daughter, God willing, would now grow up and live, while all those other children would never have the chance.

This was the one moment, he had told Natalia with earnest enthusiasm... while Yeltsin was fighting to cement and build on Gorbachev's reforms... the one moment when he might be able to contribute something and make a difference.

If it didn't work out he could always find another job, he was confident of that. And they had close to sixty thousand dollars in savings – a fortune by Russian standards – sitting safely in an Estonian bank account, to provide them with a financial buffer for at least a few years.

Natalia had been bewildered at first but as he explained she had listened, and when she understood that this was something he needed to do she had begun to accept the whole idea – until he began detailing the specifics of the new career he had in mind.

When he told her about the interview he had already had with Vladimir Tsekhanov, the man Yeltsin had

selected as his new chief of economic counter-intelligence at the FSB, her face had drained of color and her head had turned from side to side in dismay.

“Niko, not *them*.” she had pleaded.

But Nikolai had taken her hands in his and persuaded her as he always did because now his own mind was made up and he had become resolute; perhaps even a little idealistic again.

During their meeting Tsekhanov had explained how Yeltsin’s people were determined to clean out the last remnants of the KGB and build a new, modern intelligence service in its place, one that this time really *would* serve the people. There was a position for Nikolai if he wanted it; they needed people with his qualifications. He would start as a senior officer in Tsekhanov’s department in a role where his skills could be applied to help stem the systemic corruption that was threatening to cripple the new society. It would be his responsibility to build cases against individuals suspected of involvement in economic corruption, individuals who were becoming rich by stealing from the state. An oversimplification, perhaps, but a truth as Nikolai saw it: stealing money that could be used to save children’s lives.

So, with Natalia’s reluctant blessing, a little over a

year ago Nikolai Aven had joined the FSB and his enthusiasm and skill had already begun to pay dividends.

After a crash program in basic tradecraft supervised by Vari, and two months of intensive training in an anonymous office building on Moscow's southern outskirts, Nikolai had been handed his first case, an investigation into a price rigging scam on Moscow Council tenders. Three months later he had a middle ranking city bureaucrat and two of the construction company's managers sitting in adjacent jail cells in the Butyrka detention center contemplating their futures. His superiors were impressed.

This first assignment had been followed by a string of further successes in a raft of cases involving everything from minor official corruption to currency fraud and black marketeering, each of which Nikolai had been able to dispatch with relative ease. What he hadn't found quite so easy to deal with however, was coming to terms with the discovery of the seething mass of deformed species and sub-cultures that actually inhabited the undergrowth of Russia's distorted new society. He had always recognized that this other world existed, just hadn't begun to comprehend its dimension. Hadn't for a moment realized just how endemically corrupt his country had become, or

– if he were truly honest with himself – perhaps had always been.

Increasingly, these days, Nikolai found himself wondering whether he had made a mistake. Whether he had embarked on a futile journey that, in the end, would lead nowhere and achieve nothing. Less frequently, but increasingly more often, a more abstract concern had begun to intrude on his thoughts. It was a strange feeling. A hollow undefined fear, as if each day now took him one step further across the fragile surface of some dark, frozen lake.

These were the doubts and anxieties that crept into his mind in those rare moments when it lay vacant: when he stood alone in the shower, or studied his reflection in the bathroom mirror as he lifted the razor to his jaw. But then he would hear Natalia's voice calling him from the hall, telling him that Vari was waiting downstairs, and he would thrust the razor under the tap – at the same time rinsing the thought from his mind – dry his face, button his shirt and set out again on the course he had chosen, hoping that what he did that day would somehow make a difference.

As it happened, his most recent case had been his most successful yet.

The apprehension of a German banker suspected of

laundering cash for the *mafiya*, intercepted at Sheremetyevo II while trying to board an Aeroflot flight to Geneva with close to two million US in his luggage. After two days in Lefortovo the banker had been understandably keen to cut a deal and that was how the Ivankov connection had first come up.

One thing led to another, Nikolai had learned. Just like playing a game of dominoes.

There was no hard evidence, only the banker's word. But with the somewhat skeptical approval of his superiors Nikolai had been cleared to start his own limited investigation of Marat Ivankov and now the growing dossier was beginning to tell its own tale.

A lone entrepreneur who had risen from nowhere to become one of Moscow's business elite, with *ZAVOSET*, his private empire, expanding at an astonishing rate. Long-established links with the military. Strong connections with politicians and bureaucrats alike. And – on the strength of the German banker's anxious offering and the surveillance undertaken since – steadily emerging evidence of some other even less socially desirable associations.

The BMW was leaving again. The man in the charcoal suit giving its driver a relaxed wave as the vehicle

slid through the gates and rolled across the dip at the curb. Vari watched through the driver's window.

“So, Nikolai, we’ve been sniffing around Ivankov’s ass for weeks now. He has coffee with his bankers, lunch with the *apparatchiks* and rubs shoulders with the crime bosses, the *pakhans*, in the clubs at night. It’s plain as the white nights in summer that he’s crooked, but apart from a dozen rolls of film, what the fuck do we have to show for it, eh? These new rules you talk about, when do we start to see them in play?”

Nikolai snapped the folder closed and threw his partner a confident smile. “Soon now, my friend. Very soon.”

Vari pursed his lips and rocked his bulk in the seat. “You sound very sure about that, Niko. So why would that be?”

Nikolai shifted his gaze past Vari to the house beyond the closed gates. “Because now I have someone on the inside.”

Vari arched his thick eyebrows and slid Nikolai a sideways glance. “Do you now?” For a moment he seemed to consider his own question. “So... you have someone on the inside. I’m impressed.” He nodded sagely and paused again. When next he spoke his voice had an altogether different tone.

“Nikolai, let me tell you something. This one is different. This one has *real* money and *real* connections. Hasn’t it occurred to you that if *you* have someone on the inside, he could have, too?”

## 2

MARAT IVANKOV STOOD with his back to the room, peering through the angled slats of the blinds, studying the street. His feet were set apart. At ease. Shoulders squared, hands behind his back, rolling a gold cigarette lighter between his fingers. He took a breath and spoke without turning.

“You know, Vitaly, I have to admit, they are actually starting to irritate me.”

Vitaly Kolbasov had finished counting; now he was stacking the bundles of notes back into the open briefcase. He looked up without comment. After seven years as Marat Ivankov’s lieutenant he knew when he was not expected to respond.

Ivankov took a step back from the window and turned to face him.

“It’s all there?”

“All there,” Kolbasov replied. He glanced down at the carefully arranged stacks of American bills. “Five hundred thousand.”

Ivankov nodded without bothering to look at the money. “Good. Get Gilmanov to put it in the safe overnight. Tell him I want it back up here at noon tomorrow, before the general arrives.”

Kolbasov snapped the lid shut, spun the combination and hefted the briefcase from the desk. More than twenty years’ salary for a general. Surprising how little it weighed.

Marat Ivankov steepled his fingers to his lips. “And when you’ve finished, call our friend Stephasin on the secure line and tell him I’d like him to join me for a drink tonight. Not one of our clubs. Make it Metelitsa, around eleven. Book a private room.”

“And if he is not available?” Vitaly enquired.

Ivankov answered with a hard stare. “Being unavailable is not an option.”

Gregori Gilmanov sat alone in his first floor office chewing his lip and contemplating the briefcase Vitaly Kolbasov had deposited there a few minutes earlier.

It was a generous office. Large, well-appointed, tastefully decorated with expensive furniture and a

delightful garden view. It even had its own private, marble-tiled bathroom. A recollection flashed through his mind: Vitaly Kolbasov showing him through the doorway just six months ago, addressing him with that disarming smile: “I do hope you will be comfortable here, Gregori.”

“I’m sure I will be,” he remembered replying, barely able to contain his delight. But as things had turned out, nothing could have been further from the truth.

For the first month in his impressive new role as *ZAVOSET*’s deputy financial controller, things had been so hectic that Gregori hadn’t even had the chance to appreciate his new surroundings. Then by the time he had accumulated sufficient understanding of Marat Ivankov’s business affairs to be able to carry out his duties, he had realized the terrible mistake he had made in taking the job, and along with that realization had come the dreadful comprehension that he was now trapped and it was already too late to escape. And however difficult it may have been at the time to imagine that things could get worse, just a month later they had.

One bleak January morning the financial controller, his immediate superior – an overweight, balding, former bureaucrat who drank too much, slept too little and kept sullenly to himself – had simply failed to turn up for work. A week later, when there was still no sign of the

man, Vitaly Kolbasov had visited Gregori in his office, closed the door, helped himself to a chair, brushed down the lapels of his perfectly tailored gray suit jacket and solicitously spun him some marginally plausible tale about the fellow running off with a young woman half his age whom he'd met at one of Ivankov's clubs. It was a complete fiction of course, but Gregori had listened earnestly as he knew was expected of him. The positive side of things, Kolbasov had pointed out, was that Gregori was now familiar enough with *ZAVOSET's* financial affairs to be able to take over, and so he was to be promoted.

Coincidence, or perhaps not, depending upon the level of paranoia with which one reflected on the timing.

Along with this involuntary elevation had come another thousand dollars a week, the keys to a junior Mercedes and a brief but pointed lecture from Kolbasov on Mr Ivankov's expectations of his senior executives combined with a short critique on the current inadequacies of his grooming. Thus he had dutifully invested the first six weeks of his increased salary in a new wardrobe but had so far managed to avoid responding to the suggestion that he should consider moving into the even more spacious and elaborate office that still sat ominously vacant next to his own.

By that stage Gregori Gilmanov's accumulated, now inescapable knowledge of *ZAVOSET*'s operations and Marat Ivankov's dealings had become not just dangerous, but explosive. So explosive that each time he dressed in one of his expensive new jackets to drive to work, the appreciation of what he had become involved in hung so heavily on his shoulders he couldn't help feeling that its cloth might just as well have been cut from Semtex.

Strangely enough, before long, Kolbasov's explanation regarding the disappearance of his former boss had begun to seem almost credible.

The complexity of *ZAVOSET*'s dealings was astonishing and now Gregori was working fourteen hours a day just trying to keep up with the money flow. Quite apart from the issue of legality, the pressure was incessant and made even worse by the fact that there was no one – least of all Lena, his wife – with whom he could safely share the burden of his knowledge.

They understood that, of course. Understood that he needed release, and that was where his other executive benefit came in. The unlimited expense account at Ivankov's clubs. His alcohol consumption was rising alarmingly and on more than one recent occasion he had stumbled awake in some unfamiliar bed in a strange apartment beside some woman other than his wife. As a

not unsurprising consequence his four year old marriage was now in just about as fragile a state as Yeltsin's new Federation.

He had been sitting alone in the lobby bar of the Metropol one evening a few weeks before, nursing a large vodka and reflecting bleakly on all of this, when Nikolai Aven had happened past his table, done a double take, recognized him and returned to say hello. Nikolai Aven whom he had worked with at the American bank and hadn't seen for almost two years. What a coincidence that had been. Or seemed to be. For justifiable reasons Gregori Gilmanov had become increasingly suspicious of his own judgment.

Anyway, at Nikolai's suggestion they had gone on to dinner at some out of the way place Nikolai had chosen, where the vodka had been followed by two bottles of excellent French wine which in turn had been followed by still more vodka. Nikolai had seemed to sense the strain he was under and had encouraged him to share his problems and by midnight he had spilled his guts on everything. And by the time he'd realized what he'd done, it was again too late. It was only then that Nikolai had told him about his own new career and how it was just possible that he might be able to help.

Despite the cool flow of the air-conditioning the

office felt overwhelmingly stuffy. Gregori stared at the briefcase and raised a hand to the nape of his neck, wiping away the thick film of perspiration that had settled over his skin.

Hard evidence, that was what Nikolai said he needed. The sort of evidence that would guarantee an indictment. Then the FSB would look after Gregori and Lena, give them new identities and move them someplace safe. "Someplace safe." He remembered Nikolai's words and couldn't help a short cynical laugh. And where might that be?

So, hard evidence was what he wanted.

Gregori knew where he could get it. He'd seen the videotapes and the transcripts of Ivankov's meetings with the politicians and bureaucrats neatly labelled and lined up on a shelf of the vault in the basement. But how the hell would he ever get them out? More to the point, would he even have the guts to try?

They were the questions he'd wrestled with for the two sober weeks following his encounter with Nikolai Aven, running hot and cold – determined one day, terrified the next – until finally he reached the conclusion that he had no other option. The plan itself was the easy part. But now the opportunity had come to implement it he was just plain pissing himself with terror.

Still... He stared at the briefcase. It was his only chance. If he didn't, and if the FSB managed to nail Ivankov anyway, the odds were, he was going to end up in prison, treated all the more harshly for his failure to cooperate. His life had become a living hell. He had to try and get out of this and there was only one way to do it.

He took a deep breath, rose from his chair and pushed it back, locked his hand around the leather grip and dragged the briefcase from the desk. Said a silent prayer and stepped out of his office and into the abyss.

He passed the empty room next to his own, turned left and continued evenly along the corridor. A secretary was coming towards him, heading in the opposite direction. Her eyes fell to the briefcase then lifted quickly, as if she had been caught spying on something that was none of her affair. Gregori forced a tight smile in exchange for her own as they passed.

He stopped at the elevator landing, pressed the down button and waited. The car arrived and he stepped inside, turned to the front and punched his code into the illuminated key pad.

The doors slid shut and his imagination flared to life. Suddenly he was in a prison cell: stark gray walls; bare light blazing overhead; bucket in the corner for his waste. He blinked and swallowed the image, beads of

perspiration trickling down the back of his neck like a trail of tiny migrating insects. He began to lift his free hand to wipe them away then caught himself, remembering the security cameras above his head watching his every movement, dropped his hand to his side again and smeared his damp palm against the leg of his trousers.

The elevator came to silent stop and the doors parted. Gregori drew a breath and stepped out, striding forward down the long, empty corridor, the sound of his footfalls on the polished vinyl amplified and tossed back at him from the concrete walls on either side. Behind him, he knew, another camera was tracking his path, the eye of its lens fixed on his back as steadily as the beam of a laser.

He reached the door to the vault and stopped.

Key pad. Enter number.

He shifted his grip on the handle of the briefcase and waited for the door to open.

Step inside. Wait.

The door fell back into place, the lock engaged and a row of overhead fluorescents stuttered to life.

No cameras here, thank God!

He let go his breath and swiped the sweat from the

back of his neck, his eyes taking in the familiar surroundings.

The vault was five meters square, three high, with evenly spaced shelves on either side of a central aisle. The cash safe lay at the far end behind another electronically locked door. The clock was ticking now. Much more than a couple of minutes in here and whoever was manning the monitors upstairs might start to get suspicious.

Three strides and he reached the second key pad. His fingers tripped across the numbers, and stumbled.

*Shit!* He cursed and stabbed the *clear* button, ran the sequence again and waited.

A single long beep approved the combination and the lock disengaged. Gregori grabbed the handle and pushed back the heavy door, rearranged bricks of banknotes to clear a space on the middle shelf, set the briefcase down and swung the door shut, locking it into place.

That was the easy part.

Now his eyes swung up to the top shelf on the left, settling on the row of videotapes he'd first noticed the day he had spent half an hour down here on Kolbasov's instructions, searching for a packet of mislaid bearer bonds. He cast around for something to stand on, found a metal stool, dragged it across the aisle and clambered up

onto it, running his fingers across the white plastic spines, reading the names and dates on the handwritten labels. There was no time to worry about which might be the most valuable. He picked a tape at random, then another, extracted the black cassettes, snapped the empty cases shut and slid them back into place.

He'd found the missing bonds in a filing drawer on the next shelf down. That was where he'd seen the transcripts.

Stepping down from the stool, he hauled the drawer open and started flicking through the files, scanning the labels for a match to the tapes. He found what he was searching for, set down the tapes, rifled a dozen loose pages from the covers, slid the empty folders back into the drawer and eased it shut. For a moment he paused. Closed his eyes and forced himself to take three long, even breaths. Then, driven on only by the simple, unbearable fear that consumed him, he started again. Wrenched his tie aside, fumbled at the buttons of his shirtfront until the opening was wide enough, pushed the file extracts inside against his chest and kicked the stool out of the way, re-buttoning his shirt as he went. He paused then, staring at the tapes, weighing up options. Made his decision, took a cassette in either hand, swept them around to his back

and slid them under his jacket and inside the waistband of his trousers.

How long had he been?

What did it matter? He'd done it now and there was no turning back. But the panic was setting in. His heart was pounding beneath the sheath of paper wrapped against his chest and his mouth had started to crawl with a bitter taste like aluminum. He tried swallowing against it but the taste stayed. And he had to keep moving.

He patted down his shirt, straightened his tie and buttoned his jacket, hit the key pad inside the door, stood back and waited for the vault to open.

The security camera tracked his progress back to the elevator then lost interest and whirled to another focus. Inside the car Gregori edged to the back, praying to God the monitors couldn't pick up the outline of the tapes beneath his jacket.

The ride back up to the first floor took an eternity; the long walk back to his office, twice that. When he finally did reach it he collapsed into the chair behind his desk and sat staring at the open door as the terror of what he had done swelled through his veins. Then, when he was certain it was impossible to imagine any greater fear than he already felt, he somehow forced himself to gather

together a pile of computer print-outs, set them down in front of him, lowered his head and pretended to read.

For ten minutes he sat like this, filled with an ominous dread, waiting, expecting them to come for him; expecting Vitaly Kolbasov to appear at any moment in the open doorway. Then, when they didn't come for him – when no one appeared – the terror began to slowly ebb away and Gregori began to experience a curious light-headedness. A strange sense of guarded elation.

Fifteen minutes more and he set the papers aside, rose unsteadily from his chair, walked the few steps to his private bathroom, closed and locked the door behind him and fell back against the heavy timber panel.

Holy Christ! He had actually done it!

He waited for the throbbing in his temples to subside then shook back his cuff and stared at his watch.

Almost seven thirty. Late enough. And the sooner this was over now, the better. He was an accountant. Accountants weren't made for this kind of thing.

He dragged himself upright, pulled the tapes from his belt and the papers from his shirt and set them down on the vanity, then stepped across to the closet and pulled out an oversized shopping bag. Gloss white, red silk cord handles, the Laura Biagiotti logo, emblazoned stylish and bold in cherry and gray. The single, boxed silk chemise

inside had cost him the best part of a month's salary when he'd bought it at the designer's store in the Radisson Slavjanskaya a week ago, while what was left over had covered a second purchase from a far less salubrious shop in an alley at the back of the Arbat. But why worry about the cost? If the plan came off it would have been a small price to pay, and if it didn't...

Moving quickly now he set the bag down on the closed lid of the toilet, pulled a penknife from his pocket and started work.

Twenty minutes later Gregori Gilmanov snapped off his office light and set out again along the corridor, this time heading in the opposite direction.

The work stations he passed were empty now, the evening darkness that had settled over them tinted by the faint electronic glow of a single active monitor. He walked evenly, with an apparent confidence that belied the clutching tightness that had once again settled in his gut.

At the end of the passage he turned left, then left again into the main entry hall. The door that led to the car park behind the building lay just half a dozen paces ahead now, but with the manned security desk set squarely in front of it, it may as well have been on the other side of the Volga.

The uniformed guard saw him coming, set his copy

of *Pravda* aside on the table and rose to his feet. Gregori met him with a silent nod, hoisted his briefcase onto the desk and followed it up with the shopping bag.

He watched silently as the guard worked through the normal routine. Open the briefcase. Shuffle back and forth through its contents. Close the briefcase. Satisfied, he snapped the locks and moved on, turning his attention to the Biagiotti carrier.

Gregori tried unsuccessfully for a smile. "My wife's birthday."

The security guard stared at him blankly, regarded the bag a moment more then spread his hands above it in a gesture of apology. Gregori nodded his allowance and watched as the man's fingers disappeared inside and re-emerged clutching the gleaming white box. He glanced at Gregori again, set the box down respectfully on the desk, pried off the lid, placed it to one side, and began exploring the delicate tissue with his thick fingers, finally lifting the chemise gently from its wrapping. Uncertain about what to do next he shook the garment lightly and the cream silk slinked and roiled out of his fingers and slithered into a pool on the table's surface. It occurred to Gregori that his attention remained inappropriately fixed on the empty carton's lining. He snapped aside quickly to

meet the guard's eyes, finding in them, to his relief, nothing more than clumsy embarrassment.

He reached forward with both hands.

"Here, let me help."

This time the smile worked.

Gregori scooped up the clearly expensive garment, folded it back to order, lowered it carefully into the box and was reaching for the lid when he felt a strong hand settle on his shoulder. He started in fright and the blessed relief he had just begun to feel recoiled like a snake. When he turned he found Vitaly Kolbasov standing behind him, observing him with a watchful smile.

Ivankov's assistant dipped his head towards the white and red bag.

"You have been doing some shopping I see."

Gregori's brain scrambled to catch up.

"Vitaly. You startled me."

He turned away again, spinning out time to recompose, concentrating on his packing, sealing the lid of the box carefully before facing Kolbasov again with a clumsy grin.

"Lena, my wife. Today is her birthday. I wanted something special for her. I recalled you mentioning how impressed you and Mr Ivankov had been with the Biagiotti showing you attended at the Kremlin and then I

heard last week that she had opened a store here in Moscow.”

Kolbasov gave a nod of approbation and traced a finger across the slick surface of the carrier. “You’re learning well, Gregori. I’m flattered you pay me such attention.” His gaze swung across to the guard who had been watching their exchange. “So, Andrey, are we all finished here?”

The guard looked from Kolbasov to Gregori, then back at the carrier. Kolbasov gave an impatient wave. “Well go on, man. Do not keep Mr Gilmanov waiting.”

The guard nodded quickly, dipped his hands back into the bag, rummaged for a moment and came up clutching two plastic boxes, tipping them towards him and studying them with an expression of growing astonishment.

Kolbasov’s smile thinned out and his face tightened. His eyes darted between Gilmanov and the boxes. When he spoke he addressed his question to the guard.

“Well. What is it?”

The aluminum taste was swelling through Gregori’s mouth again and he felt a strange quiver at the base of his tongue as if he might at any moment be about to vomit. He swallowed and turned away, unable to bring himself to watch as the guard surrendered the cassette cases into

Kolbasov's outstretched hand. Gregori's legs were trembling now; the heat flaring in his cheeks. His mind was stumbling to measure the probability of escape when he heard the peculiar sound behind him. It started as an abrupt chuckle of amusement, stopped then started again, growing steadily louder until it became a shrill wave of hilarity that filled the empty lobby.

Gregori forced himself to look back. Vitaly Kolbasov was clutching a plastic cassette case in either hand, rocking with laughter as his eyes roamed the lurid montage of body parts displayed on their covers. He shook his head and skimmed a tape across the table to the bemused guard.

*"Bozhe moi! Andrey, take a look! Can you believe it? Would you ever have thought our studious Mr Gilmanov had such eclectic interests?"*

He followed the first tape with the second, burst out laughing again and raised a finger to wipe his eyes. Now that he had been invited the security guard joined in with his own tentative snigger. Kolbasov's fingers tightened again on his shoulder and Gregori could feel the damp warmth of the other man's breath in his ear as he leaned forward confidentially.

*"Italian lingerie and American pornography. A fine*

selection. My congratulations, Gilmanov. I'm sure your Lena will be absolutely delighted."

Gregori managed a nervous laugh.

Kolbasov pulled himself upright and flicked a hand towards the cassettes. "Put them away, Andrey. Hurry up. Mr Gilmanov's wife is at home waiting for her surprise." He turned back to Gregori, grinning broadly. "And you my friend... you have a wonderful evening. And I shall expect to hear all the details tomorrow." He released his grasp on Gregori's shoulder, turned abruptly and strode away towards the main staircase, calling back as he went. "Remember, Gregori ... every little detail."

Gregori Gilmanov half walked, half stumbled across the car park in the descending darkness, tossed his briefcase and the shopping bag into the trunk of the Mercedes and fell into the driver's seat, drained and exhausted. His heart was racing, the blood pounding in his temples. He closed his eyes and clamped his fingers around the steering wheel, squeezing so hard he was almost certain it would snap in his grasp, sitting like that for a full minute, trying to drain the tension from his body.

Finally he let go his grip, dragged his seatbelt into place, turned the ignition and – an afterthought – hit the central locking. Backed up from his parking space and

eased the vehicle slowly out onto the street and into the Moscow night.

Marat Ivankov looked up across the edge of his reading glasses as Vitaly Kolbasov re-entered his office.

“What was all that noise about?”

Kolbasov walked across to Ivankov’s desk, paused to regard him questioningly for a moment, then, realizing what his boss was referring to, broke into a wide grin.

“My laughing, you mean?” He chuckled lightly again to himself and began sorting through a stack of correspondence. “Just Gilmanov. I happened to be passing by as he was having his evening shakedown. He seemed nervous as a cat so I hung back to find out why, and you know what it was?” Kolbasov found what he was looking for and drew a piece of paper out of the pile. “He was smuggling out some underwear and a couple of dirty movies he’d bought for his wife’s birthday.” Kolbasov shook his head with recalled amusement. “You should have seen him. He looked like some schoolboy caught jerking off in the toilets.” He chuckled again and started to turn away but Ivankov’s calm, measured voice held him.

“And have you checked, Vitaly?”

Kolbasov blinked. “I’m sorry? Checked what?”

Ivankov lifted his glasses from his nose and lowered

them tolerantly to his desk, regarding Vitaly Kolbasov with a chill stare.

“Checked his personnel records, Vitaly. Checked that it *is* his wife’s birthday.”

Vitaly Kolbasov blinked again, looked aside, down, then answered in a subdued voice. ‘To be honest? No, it didn’t occur... ’

Marat Ivankov cut him dead.

‘Then perhaps you should check, Vitaly. Don’t you think?’

### 3

VARI VLASENKO SWUNG the black Volga off the Garden Ring and north onto Prospekt Mira. Beside him Nikolai sat gazing vacantly at the passing blur of colored neon that marked the relentless advance of the city's Westernization. They passed a towering pylon sign crowned by the now familiar golden double arches. How did the saying go?... Napoleon couldn't conquer Moscow. It had taken McDonald's to do that.

"A nice area," Vari observed, throwing him a glance. "You're a lucky man, Niko. A beautiful wife and daughter. Money in the bank. You can afford a good apartment in a nice part of town." His gaze trailed away, following the passing of a sleek, black Jaguar headed in the opposite direction. "You know, I still wonder why

someone who can have all this would choose to spend his days wading in the sewers.”

Nikolai glanced at his partner, lips bent in a dry smile.

“Ever had a problem with your plumbing, Vari?” He turned back to the streetscape, not expecting a response.

“We did, a few weeks back. A blocked toilet, nothing major at first. Natalia reported it to the superintendent but he didn’t want to get his hands dirty so he called a plumber. But the plumber was busy doing another job that was worth more to him and he didn’t come. So before long the drains in the bathroom and kitchen began backing up and the same thing started happening in the other apartments on our floor. Then the neighbors upstairs started having problems.”

Vari slung him an uncertain look. ‘So, what’s your point?’

Nikolai drew a breath and swung back from the window. “My point, Vari, is that if you have a problem with your sewer and no one’s interested in trying to fix it, then pretty soon everyone’s swimming in shit.”

Vari considered this a moment. Gave Nikolai a thoughtful nod and turned back to the road. “I see... I think.” He drove on for a while, one hand draped loosely on the wheel, then threw the long gear shift back a notch,

steered the black sedan into the central lane, signaled a left turn and changed the subject. ‘So. What did you get her?’

“What did I get who?” Nikolai replied absently.

Vari shot him another glance. “Natalia of course.” He slowed the Volga to a stop, dropped it into first and spoke across the wheel as he searched for a gap in the traffic. ‘Today’s Friday, right? Yesterday you told me that Saturday is your anniversary. So, what did you get her?’

“Oh shit!” Nikolai groaned. Slumped in his seat. “I forgot. Totally forgot.”

He shrugged back the sleeve of his jacket and raised his wrist to the light, throwing a desperate glance at his watch. Five after eleven. Vari echoed his own conclusion.

‘Too late now, my friend.’ The traffic eased and Vari hit the accelerator, plunging the car across Mira and into Ulitsa Kapelski. He looked sideways. “And what was that you were saying about swimming in shit?” He eased off the gas and swung right into Schepkina, continuing on for a few hundred meters before sliding the Volga into the curb, leaving the engine running. Nikolai sat for a moment, staring up at the facade of his building then grimaced and sprang the door.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

“Anytime, little brother.” Vari brushed a hand from the wheel. “What are friends for?”

Nikolai watched from the front stoop as the Volga's tail lights meandered down the street. When they rounded the corner back to Mira he dragged his keys from his pocket and turned to the entry. The glass panel floated against the gloom of the foyer beyond, forming a leaden mirror of his image. The lobby lights had blown a week ago and still weren't fixed; why would he have imagined they would be? He lifted the keys to the lock then paused, studying his own reflection.

He was changing. It wasn't just the unfavorable cast of the light. He was tired and he looked it, but there was more to it than that. His clothes hung more loosely on his slender frame and his face seemed to have become more angular, the cheekbones and the line of his jaw more pronounced, his eyes harder and more cynical.

At university in Leningrad he had worn his hair long with a moustache and beard, his mother remarking how much he looked like the image of Jesus Christ in the faded print that hung above her bed. If there had been a resemblance it had faded as well with the passing years. He was clean shaven now, his chestnut hair cropped short, still thick enough, but the progress of its recession clearly evident above his forehead. Still... He drew a breath. When you considered it, for thirty-three what did he have

to complain about? From what he could recall, at that age Jesus Christ had been dead.

When he and Natalia had first moved into the apartment three years ago, just after Larisa had been born, the elevator had worked. But then six months ago their landlord – a young entrepreneur who had begun buying up flats the moment the privatization starting gun went off – had finally persuaded the last of the old tenants to sell their occupancy rights, and since then the breakdowns had become more frequent until one day the elevator had stopped running altogether. Since then the car had been converted into a kind of ground floor stock room from which the building superintendent – the owner's brother-in-law – now traded his limited supply of light bulbs and other maintenance requisites to the neighborhood's highest bidders.

At least there were no secrets about the owner's agenda. He'd been happy to lease out those flats he already owned while his game of Moscow Monopoly played out. Presumably the rent helped pay interest to some *mafiya* shark who had loaned him the money. But now that he'd won the game he wanted the building vacant. And why was that?

The answer was easy. Quality pre-revolution building. Six floors with five spacious apartments each.

Nice design, good location, good condition... well, comparatively speaking, anyway. And now just one owner to deal with. That meant, for a sale as it stood, their entrepreneur landlord could now probably expect to pick up \$4.5 million minimum. Not bad on what Nikolai had calculated as a cost of less than one. Then the developer who bought it would spend another three or so renovating before tipping each apartment out at around half a million a time, to gross \$15 million; maybe even more. American dollars of course. And all completely legal.

So, now Nikolai and Natalia and Larisa were searching for somewhere else to live. It was a pleasant neighborhood, as Vari had observed, and while between Nikolai's salary and their savings they could still afford the thousand a month this place had been costing, from what they'd seen so far, the likelihood of finding anything as good in Mira for that kind of rent was now little more than a dream.

Nikolai passed the locked elevator car and rounded the corner to the staircase. At least it was only a three-flight climb. For now, most of the tenants from level four down were still hanging on. Everyone on five and above had given up and abandoned ship weeks ago.

He reached his lobby, found the right key and let himself in.

The apartment lay still and silent; in darkness save for the soft glow from Larisa's nightlight that trickled along the hallway. Nikolai grimaced at his own guilt. Tonight – like so many others – he'd promised he'd be home early for dinner. By nine Natalia would have put Larisa to bed; by ten thirty she would have given up herself. He set his keys down quietly on the hall table, slipped off his shoes and padded along the corridor towards the bathroom.

He undressed in the dark, hung his clothes behind the door, splashed some water across his face and made his way to the bedroom at the end of the corridor.

The light from Larisa's room pooled at the entry, falling across a shopping bag set on the floor just inside the doorway. Shopping. Forgotten anniversary. Broken promises. Guilt. Nikolai sighed, stepped around the obstruction and made his way across to the bed, slipping beneath the covers beside Natalia and lowering his head carefully onto the pillows so as not to disturb her. For a time he lay there quietly in the dark, staring up at the ceiling, wondering about his life and where it was taking him – where it was taking them all – then gradually the soft even flow of Natalia's breathing and the warm scent of her body next to him began to wash the anxieties aside

and he fell asleep smiling, despite himself, at all of his blessings.

Nikolai woke a little after seven to the rich smell of fresh coffee and the sharp insistent tug of tiny fingers on his left earlobe. “Daddy! Daddy! Look, look, look, look, look!”

He shook away the remnants of sleep and turned in the direction of the pain. Satisfied that she had her father’s attention, Larisa let go her grip on his ear and thrust something large, brown and woolly into his face. Niko drew back, blinking to focus, and came eye to uncomfortable eye with Boris the Bear, resplendent in drop earrings, two strands of pearls and a small pink tutu that appeared uncomfortably tight on his ample waist. Boris seemed to be looking decidedly uneasy.

“Look, Daddy!” Larisa insisted. “Boris is going out.”

Nikolai looked, not at Boris, but at his daughter. At the perfect oval of her face, her long silken hair – already as dark and lustrous as her mother’s – and the impenetrable depth of her almost black eyes. He smiled and ran a hand across her forehead.

‘So I see,’ he nodded seriously. “And you’d better keep your eye on him. Dressed like that you never know what he might pick up.” He looked at the bear again. Could have sworn Boris was glaring at him.

Natalia’s voice reached them from along the

corridor. “Larisa, leave your father be. He’s tired. And hurry up or you’ll be late. Aunt Raisa will be here any minute.”

“Okay, Mummy,” Larisa called. She started to trot away, then stopped abruptly, turned and hurried back to the bed, set Boris down on the bedclothes, threw her hands around Niko’s neck in a giant hug, then plucked up the unfortunate bear and pattered off with him again. Nikolai shuffled upright as Natalia appeared in the doorway. She was wearing one of his shirts, three buttons open, cuffs turned back, a preview of her long slender thighs available to the point where they disappeared beneath the hem of the striped, cotton fabric. She propped against the architrave, smiling, dangling Larisa’s small pink rucksack from one hand, using the other to toss back a lick of dark hair that had fallen forward across her eyes. She lifted her chin, a fraction of a nod directed back over her shoulder.

“Raisa from downstairs is taking her to the markets. Back at lunchtime.” Her tongue teased her upper lip. ‘Seeing it’s our anniversary, I thought you might like...’ The sharp trill of the buzzer from the hall cut her off.

“Mummy, Mummy!” Larisa’s tiny feet began stuttering back along the corridor. “Raisa’s here. Raisa’s here!”

Natalia called across her shoulder. "Coming, darling." She turned back to Nikolai, picking up where she'd left off... "You know." Her eyes slid down to the shopping bag that still sat on the floor inside the door. Nikolai's gaze followed.

"Know what?" he answered hesitantly.

Natalia raised her eyebrows, gave a little shrug. "A private showing?"

The buzzer rang again, followed a second later by another insistent, high-pitched demand from Larisa.

"Mummy! Come at once or I'll be late!"

Natalia rolled her eyes again and called back with an indulgent voice.

"Coming, Larisa."

She began to turn then stopped and reached into the pocket of her shirt. "Oh, by the way," her slender fingers withdrew, clasping a tiny package, "This is for you." She lobbed it lightly across the room towards him and his hand shot up instinctively, clutching it from the air. When he looked back again Natalia had gone.

She returned a few minutes later, carrying a tray of coffee and rolls and set it down on one of the bedside tables, all the time watching Nikolai for his reaction. He was holding the small gold crucifix in the palm of his

hand, soothing the fine engraving with his fingers, the wrapping from the tiny package discarded beside him.

Natalia settled cross-legged on the bed and looked at him. “Do you like it?” She seemed anxious. “I mean, I know you’re not really a religious person, but it belonged to my great-grandfather. He died in the Revolution, and I just thought...”

Nikolai bit his lip, holding back his emotion. He stared into her black, liquid eyes, watching them searching his own. “It’s beautiful,” he answered softly. “I’ll never lose it, I promise.” He closed the crucifix into his fist and reached forward, drawing her to him, kissing her gently on the forehead. She hugged him back, tilted her head until her mouth found his, kissed him, then pulled back and grinned.

‘So!’ She smacked the bedclothes with an open hand. “That’s my gift. So now for yours!” She bounced from the bed before Nikolai had a chance to speak, scooped up the oversized white shopping bag and clutched it to her chest then stopped and looked serious for a moment. “I have a confession. I did peek when the delivery man brought it last night, but only a little peek, okay? Now, stay there. Back in a minute.”

She skipped out of the room leaving Nikolai totally perplexed.

What delivery man? What present?

He tried to rewind his brain, backing up past the bag he'd seen last night when he'd come to bed, to the conversation with Vari in the car on the way home. He hadn't bought Natalia a gift because he'd been so goddamned self-absorbed he'd forgotten to. The only remote possibility he could think of was that his partner had anticipated that he would forget and had arranged something for him, but that just didn't make any sense either. His mind was still clutching for answers when Natalia reappeared in the doorway, his shirt replaced by a stunning cream slip that clung to the curves of her body like liquid silk. She stood before him, turning her head slowly from side to side.

"Niko," she breathed in awe. "It's just glorious."

She spun slowly for him, letting the fabric glide with her, tracing the shape of her breasts, following the curve of her back and hips, then she was facing him again, flicking the same errant strand of hair from her eyes.

"You are a bad boy, Niko. This must have cost a fortune." The corners of her mouth lifted in a mischievous grin. "And that's not the only reason you're bad, is it?"

Nikolai regarded her with a look of blank confusion.

Natalia's eyes narrowed. "There's no point

pretending. What do you have to say about these?”

He noticed now that Natalia was holding something in her hand. What was it? A book? She started towards him, lifting it, holding it out in front of her.

“I admit I peeked, yesterday, but I only looked at the box on top.” She sounded almost shocked. “I had no idea about these.”

She was standing in front of him now, holding the cassette cases towards him. Nikolai’s eyes fell to their covers and he stared at them with astonishment. He pulled himself upright, took the boxes from her outstretched hand, swung his legs from the bed and sat on its edge, shaking his head.

“Natalia...” He looked up at her. Shook his head again. “I don’t know anything about these.” He set the cassettes aside and reached up, taking her hands, pressing them between his. “Listen, Natalia, I’m sorry... I *forgot* our anniversary. Forgot it completely.” He traced a hand down her side, feeling the silk shimmer beneath his fingers. “I wish I had chosen this for you, God knows you deserve something this beautiful, but I didn’t.” His eyes fell to the cassettes again, tracing their lurid covers. His brow furrowed. “And these...” he stared up into Natalia’s dark, puzzled eyes, unable to separate her disappointment

from her confusion. “Natalia, I’m sorry,” he shook his head, “but I have absolutely no idea what this is about. “ Natalia stood at the foot of the bed, her back turned to Nikolai as she wriggled into a pair of jeans. Behind her the cream silk slip lay discarded on the covers. She reached into a drawer, rummaged through its contents, snatched out a T-shirt. Niko watched, only too aware of the sudden distance between them.

“The man,” he tested cautiously. “The one who made the delivery. Do you remember what he said?”

Natalia answered with a tight, dismissive shrug.

“How should I know. *‘A delivery for Nikolai Aven.’* Something like that. I wasn’t paying attention.”

She dragged the T-shirt over her shoulders and tossed her head, the tautness of her movements underscoring her mood. The empty plastic cases lay open on the bed, the tapes beside them. Nikolai picked up one of the un-labelled cassettes, examined it. Drew a breath and tried again.

“Please, Natalia.” He made an effort to balance contrition and reason. “Please try to remember. It could be important.”

She turned around and looked at him. Then averted her eyes and shrugged again.

“He was about your height. Thin. Short blond hair.

Well dressed.” Perhaps it was Nikolai’s imagination, but the air between them seemed to thaw a little as Natalia worked her memory. She gave another shrug. Resigned. “Too well dressed for a delivery man, now that I think about it.” Her gaze fell, demoralized, to the silk chemise and she shook her head. “I was so pleased. And now I feel so... so stupid.”

Nikolai tried to recall some occasion when he might have felt worse. None came to mind. He got up from the bed and made his way across to her, wrapped his arms around her and felt her melt against him. Whispered in her ear.

“I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

For a long moment she remained still, then finally he felt her hair brushing against his cheek as she began nodding.

“I know,” she sighed. “I know you will.”

She clung to him a moment longer, then drew back and sealed the reconciliation with a single kiss. Across his shoulder she noticed the tray she had set down on the bedside table and sighed. “The coffee will be cold, Niko. Why don’t you get dressed and I’ll make some fresh.”

Nikolai stood in the steaming shower stall, thinking.

*‘A delivery for Nikolai Aven.’* Who the hell would

want to send him two pornographic movies and a piece of designer lingerie, and why? He turned to face the stammering stream of hot water, closed his eyes and let it play across his face as Natalia's description of the delivery man ran through his mind. His own height, thin, short blond hair, well dressed. Nikolai shook his head. No connection he could make. Nothing. He tried building the picture again in a different sequence. Short blond hair. Well dressed. Someone who knew where he lived. His eyes shot open. Christ! Gilmanov! Then at the same instant he heard Natalia's voice coming to him from behind the glass screen, tight and insistent.

"Niko!"

He turned and saw her outline behind the rippled glass. Something about her tone triggered a sense of alarm and his hands shot out immediately, locking off the taps and sealing the pipes with a shudder. He flung the door open to find Natalia staring at him with anxious, uncertain eyes, the video remote controller clasped tightly in her hand.

"Niko." Her voice was subdued. "I think you'd better come and look at this."

Nikolai snatched a towel from the rack, wrapped it around his waist and, still dripping from the shower, followed Natalia into the living room.

The curtains to the street had been drawn shut; in the corner the television shimmered with a frozen image. The empty video cases and one of the tapes lay open on the coffee table. He glanced at Natalia, down to the steady green light on the face of the VCR, back to Natalia again. She nodded. Lifted the remote and held it out tentatively to him. He frowned and took it, his eyes travelling back to the flickering image.

Four men. Figures in profile, two either side of the screen, facing each other across a long polished table.

Judging from the angle and length of the shot the camera must have been placed somewhere above them at one end of the room, its distance and the width of the lens creating a strangely exaggerated perspective.

Nikolai stepped in closer, squinting, trying to understand what he was seeing.

The two men further away from the camera were unfamiliar and by their posture appeared to be the supporting characters, each sitting back, apparently observing the interplay between their associates.

The man closest on the left sat erect and confident, his forearms resting lightly on the table's polished surface. Dark suit, white shirt, elegant patterned tie. A thick mane of long black hair swept back from a steep forehead. Dark

beard and moustache surrounding a mouth frozen partly open in the midst of speech.

Nikolai's gaze traced cautiously from the image of Marat Ivankov to the man sitting opposite. He was shorter than Ivankov by half a head, with a heavy, drooping face that descended into sagging jowls. Crimped silver hair and polished skin that shone pink from the fight above. It was a face Nikolai recognized but couldn't place. He lowered himself onto the sofa, sensing rather than seeing Natalia taking a place hesitantly beside him. His thumb played across the remote, found the *play* button and pressed it.

The end of Marat Ivankov's sentence was swallowed by the spooling of the tape, then his mouth closed and came to rest in a confident smile. Silence for a moment. Then the man sitting opposite Ivankov began to speak in a deep, gravelly voice.

'There should be no problem. The Director of the International Monetary Fund approved a further \$1.5 billion under the Systematic Transfer Facility a few weeks ago. This money is due to be shifted any day now to the Central Bank of Russia's account at New York's Federal Reserve. Part will be transferred to the Republican State Bank and the loan to your *ZAVOSET* subsidiary will be

made from there. A hundred and ten million, interest free for ten years.”

Ivankov sat impassive. “We had agreed on a hundred.”

The man opposite responded with a benign smile. “We have expenses. We ask you to pay a little more to cover them.” He tossed his hands apart. “But we arrange it for you anyway. So, what’s the problem, eh? It’s not as if it’s coming out of your pocket.” His deep voice crackled with humor. “Besides, my friend, as you well know, for a state owned and operated business, *AGEX* is already surprisingly profitable. With a virtual monopoly on agricultural chemical production east of the Urals my people tell me it’s already worth five times the price you’re paying. Probably more. Under your control, what will its value be ten years from now, Marat? Two billion wouldn’t be beyond reason.”

Ivankov nodded impassively. “And, if it is, Viktor, your 25 per cent will be worth five hundred. That’s a lot of money.”

Nikolai sat forward. Christ! That was who it was! Viktor Patrushev, Deputy Minister of the Economy.

Patrushev sighed. “Not quite, I’m afraid. You’re forgetting, we will probably have to repay the principal eventually, unless of course you can think of some creative

way to get around that. And besides,” his jowls lifted as he smiled, “My share is just 10 percent. The rest goes to our Patron who makes these opportunities possible, you know that. Besides, I’m older than you, Marat. Ten years from now when it’s time to collect who knows where I’ll be.” He glanced at the man seated beside him. “We just need a little pin money to tide us over for now, don’t we Aleksandr?”

Ivankov hooked a glance at the man beside Patrushev. Nikolai’s own eyes followed. Mid-thirties. Cool and aloof. Sleekly groomed. The appearance and air of a career bureaucrat.

Ivankov’s gaze swung back to the older man. “You have the papers?”

Patrushev threw a lazy hand towards his assistant and waited as the younger man delved into a thin leather satchel, extracted a sheaf of bound documents and passed them into his grasp. Patrushev took the documents without looking and swung them through ninety degrees to Ivankov.

“There you are, my friend.” He released his grip and let the papers drop to the table directly in front of Ivankov. “Aleksandr’s own work. Nice and simple, as you will see. The way business should be. Ten years. Interest free. No guarantees. All courtesy of our good friends at

the IMF.” His heavy cheeks fissured in a deep smile. “And so, our great country takes one more step forward on the road to economic reform.”

The tape ran on a few seconds longer before the image died and the screen cut to a flickering gray haze. Nikolai shook his head in dismay, trying to believe what he had just witnessed.

“He’s done it,” he breathed to himself. “Gilmanov’s actually done it.”

Natalia stared at him. “What, Niko? Who is Gilmanov and what has he done?” Her voice climbed with insistence. “For God’s sake, Niko, tell me. What is this all about?”

Nikolai swung around, as if only just remembering that Natalia was there in the room with him. His eyes flashed across to the video screen then back to his wife. Videotapes. Delivery. Shopping Bag. He grasped her hand, dismissing her questions.

“The shopping bag, Natalia. This is important. Really important. What else was in it?”

The intensity of his look made her check her annoyance. She stared back at him. “The box, that’s all.” She felt the pressure of his hands as they closed around hers.

“What box?”

Natalia shrugged. "The box that the slip came in."  
She shook her head. "Nothing else."

Niko sprang from the couch, drawing her with him.

"Where is it? Show me."

She stalled. "Niko!"

Her instinct was to argue – not to tell him anything until he explained to her what this was about – but then she recognized by his expression that this wasn't the time. "Larisa's room."

Nikolai dropped her hand and stepped around her, heading for the door.

"Where I changed," she called after him. "On the bed where I left it."

She turned back to the television screen, puzzling at the stammering electronic haze. Then, in the hall outside, the telephone began to ring.

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