

Prologue

Nevsky Prespekt, St. Petersburg, August, 1994

The summer sun brought them out onto the city's main shopping street; gaggles of young girls gossiping, window shopping, flirting. They clutched cheap plastic purses and wore too much make-up, yet the girls' bare, brown legs and small breasts—bolstered with padded bras—hinted at the womanly curves yet to develop. Their mini-skirts and midriff-revealing T-shirts were designed to get the attention of teenage boys, who pretended not to stare as they loitered on street corners, whistling at the unreal creatures.

It was all there, laid out for her like her own private catwalk show. Katya smiled. All she had to do was make her choice.

That was the easy part, of course. Her talent lay not in finding the pretty little things her clients required, but in knowing which of them were vulnerable, naïve, or sometimes ambitious enough to trust her. Katya's success rate was high and she knew how to cover her tracks. She was the best in the business and that included not getting caught. Or even noticed.

Elegant yet discreet, beautiful yet forgettable, Katya looked like any one of the thousands of expensively maintained women in newly capitalist Russia. Her jaw-length hair was chic and blonde, her pencil skirt and kitten heels matched her designer purse and fashionably large sunglasses hid the coldness in her gray eyes. Appearances were everything and Katya thought of the expensive labels as her work uniform.

She had been watching the four friends since they emerged from the metro an hour ago. They lingered as they walked past the European designer shops, mesmerized by the window displays that cost more than their parents' homes. Further along the famously long street, American brands—still a novelty to Russians who could remember the days of Soviet rationing—gave way to cut-price eastern European chain stores, selling copies of the western styles.

Here, the friends spent much of the morning moving between shops, before comparing their finds with one another on the sidewalk: a bright pink lipstick, a bottle of glittery nail polish and a T-shirt emblazoned with the name of a British pop group.

Perfect.

The pick-up went smoothly. She favored the accidental meeting, after which Katya feigned interest in their day's discoveries and followed this up with the suggestion

of a latte in a trendy new coffeehouse. By then, they were ready for the taking, but the “lift” was the tricky part. Occasionally, one got wary and backed away. But not often.

For these girls, all aged around 14 or 15 Katya guessed, her standard “lift” would work beautifully. Two were outstandingly pretty, with the blue eyes and wide Slavic cheekbones so highly prized in all markets. All four were slim and nubile, with that sheen of untouched innocence so essential for her particular clients.

Katya placed her espresso on the table and licked her immaculately rouged lips. She enjoyed this part.

“So, I didn’t want to say anything earlier, but I’m really a scout for *Russian Faces*.” Four pairs of eyes fixed on her as Katya handed out fake business cards. “Have you heard of us?”

Four blonde heads nodded enthusiastically. The agency had its own reality show on Russian TV; essential viewing for every teen girl.

“We’re always looking for new talent and you girls are just *sooo* beautiful,” Katya almost purred. “Say, would you like to come and do a screen test?” Her tone was casual, easy-going, as though the thought had only just occurred to her. The friends looked at each other. She could almost smell their excitement. “Our studio is just around the corner here, off the *Prospekt*. Maybe you would let me buy you that pretty skirt you like, Sasha. You would look so perfect in that.”

The oldest and least enthusiastic of the girls was cautious, but Katya knew that if Sasha took the bait, the rest would follow. Katya reached out and gently moved a stray lock of hair from Sasha’s face, like a doting aunt. “Would you like that, sweetheart?”

Fifteen minutes later and minus the price of a skirt she would return later that afternoon, Katya led the girls into the lobby of an upmarket commercial building, a block from the main street.

“We’re lucky our best photographer, Sergei, is working this weekend. We had a magazine cover to shoot, but I think he won’t mind taking some photographs of such beautiful girls, too. You’re going to love what comes next.”

The “studio” was in fact an empty unit hired for cash each month. Sergei was waiting for them, but it wasn’t a camera in the bag he carried and no one was going to be on TV. The girls faced an entirely different sort of journey into the adult world, during which that sheen of innocence would be peeled away, piece by agonizing piece.

Sergei handed Katya a roll of American dollars, which she placed in her designer purse and smiled. Yes, she really was the best in the business.

“Goodbye, girls,” she called out to the sleeping forms on the concrete floor. “Take care of yourselves, now.”

Chapter 1

Northeast Minnesota, USA. August 1994.

“We should turn around soon,” called Jaime from the stern of the open canoe. “It’ll be getting dark by the time we get home and we both have lots more packing to do before the weekend.”

“I know.” Brooke, up in the bow, nodded without turning around. In just a few days, their beloved log house on the lake—her childhood home—would not be theirs anymore. She swallowed hard. Couldn’t let her big brother see her cry. “Let’s just get around the point,” she said, waving her paddle briefly at the rocky promontory ahead. “Then we’ll have a great view across the lake into the park and plenty of space to turn.”

“OK.” Jaime sounded resigned. Brooke dipped her paddle into the water and pulled hard. Growing up on the edge of the national park, paddling a canoe came to her as naturally as walking.

The Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area in northeast Minnesota is thrust up hard against the Canadian border and had been the Kinley family’s home for all of Brooke’s life. Her first memories were of sitting in a canoe as her father pushed it the last few inches into the water, the sharp, gravelly sand of the lake scraping at the canvas. The canoe would wobble for a moment as it floated and then her father would step in, sit in the stern and dip his paddle into the water. Then they would be away, gliding across the lake with barely a ripple.

That was before he died on active military service, ambushed while on duty in Iraq, leaving Brooke’s mother to raise three children alone. Chris, the eldest, left within a couple of years for Alaska and the life of a mountain guide. Jaime had enlisted in the army and, having recently completed his basic combat and warrant officer training, he was home on a few days’ leave before heading south to Fort Rucker in Alabama and promotion to trainee helicopter pilot. Now it was time for the last Kinleys to go; Brooke to college in Washington D.C., where she would major in English literature, and their mother to a new life as a kindergarten teacher in St. Paul. The log house would soon be home to a new family. Other children would splash in the lake’s shallows and jump off the pontoon to escape the steady heat of summer, or chop wood for the stove as the first snows of winter fell.

“Dammit.” Brooke slapped her bare forearm and flicked the dead mosquito into the water. “There’s still so many around this year, even though it’s almost September.” A loon burst from the lengthening shadows on the edge of the lake ahead and splashed

across the surface, flapping its wings until airborne, while its mate called worriedly from the shore.

As they neared the promontory, the rest of the lake came into view. Flares of red and yellow marked stands of maple, tamarack, and aspen, all just starting to wear their fall colors. To Brooke's right, the promontory reared above them, the first fifteen feet sheer rock, topped with a jumble of boulders, deadfall, and a single red pine, standing tall.

"That's us," said Jaime, beginning the turn. "Bring the bow around, Brooke." Brooke nodded and reached out with her paddle to the side, ready to dig deep and swing them in a half circle, when she paused.

"Did you hear that?"

Jaime, working against the small current where the river met the lake, answered with a curt "No."

A crashing noise came from the woods up on the promontory and this time they both heard it.

"Just a bear," said Jaime. "C'mon, Brooke, I've got a lot to do this evening."

"Wait." Brooke paused and frowned, listening hard. "It's not a bear, it sounds like something moving fast and . . . can I hear dogs?"

"It'll be hunters. Great. Moose season isn't open yet and that's the last thing we need to get caught up in. Now paddle."

With a nod, Brooke reluctantly swung the bow about, turning them 180 degrees and pointing back upriver. It would be another half hour before they would reach the welcoming lights of the log house, beckoning them in from the dusk.

The crashing noise became louder, followed by the sound of something scraping on rock. Both Brooke and Jaime stopped paddling and looked up, the setting sun behind them throwing this side of the promontory into sharp relief.

Above them, a shape appeared on the highest edge of the boulders. Then it dropped below the skyline, but not before Brooke had a clear view.

"It was a person! A girl, I think!"

"Paddle!" Jaime shouted from behind. Brooke realized what he had seen—the girl was holding onto the boulders, but she was slipping. Her feet, shod in some kind of flat shoe, scabbled frantically against the rough stone as her fingers clawed into the undergrowth and soft earth above. The sound of barking dogs grew louder.

She's going to fall! Brooke thought, then realized she had said it out loud, as Jaime maneuvered the canoe closer to the rock face.

“No! We need to back off!” Brooke turned and shouted over her shoulder. “If she falls and hits the canoe, she’ll break her back. Better she lands in the water and we can fish her out.” Jaime nodded at the good sense of this and back-paddled a few feet. Brooke could see more lights now, flashlights swinging around, strobing the sky. Whoever was chasing the girl was getting closer, but still she tried to hang on to the rocks.

Then, a clump of earth came away in the girl’s hand and she let out a single yelp. Not a scream. Not even a shout, just a yelp, like a dog whose tail has been trodden on.

With a bump, the girl fell three feet onto a ledge jutting out over the sheer face of the rock above the lake. For a second she stayed motionless, seemingly dazed, then the baying of the approaching dogs appeared to penetrate her consciousness and she tried to jump up, back into the mess of boulders, but the ledge was too narrow and the ground under her left foot crumbled. Off balance, she tried to throw herself forward, but the downward momentum was too great and she slipped, rather than fell, down the rock face, landing with a splash in deep water barely three feet from the gunwale of Brooke and Jaime’s canoe.

The dogs were loud now and Brooke could hear the sounds of men’s voices too. Angry voices.

The girl burst to the surface with a gasp and both Jaime and Brooke, having hastily stowed their paddles, reached down into the black water to haul her out. Except now they were so close, Brooke could see the girl was barely more than a child; definitely several years younger than herself. The girl’s pale, wet skin and blonde hair shone in the last of the sun’s rays. She was so skinny, Brooke and Jaime had few problems pulling her into the canoe, where she lay still, wide-eyed, and panting.

Flicking her own dark curls away from her face, where they had fallen in the effort to get the girl out of the water, Brooke put a finger to her lips and the girl nodded once. Jaime swept his paddle in a firm “J” and they shot forward. Brooke pulled hard on her own paddle for three or four strokes, then looked back. Whoever was chasing the girl was having trouble reaching the edge, thanks to the boulders, so only the dogs saw them, as their canoe passed into the shadows, before finally slipping from view around a bend in the river.

