



RUSSELL BRADLEY

NICOLAS BRADLEY

**THE LAST
EMPIRE**

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by

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

Maurice Duval meditatively turned his glass in front of his eyes, peering at the play of sunlight caught in his red wine.

“I’m not upset. But it’s a shame to see your vacation wasted like that. We were planning to take a ride to Saint-Tropez and further down the coast, remember? Seems like you’ve had a change of heart —”

Roland Ogier dabbed his lips with a napkin and leaned back in his chair with an air of contentedness.

He would be turning fifty-five next year but looked much younger. Perhaps it was his eyes that gave this impression. They gazed at the world with keen interest and a dash of curiosity, childish and impish at times and contemplative at others. Combined with this gaze, neither the receding hair on the sides of his forehead nor a few pounds of excess weight made him look older but only seemed to lend him substantiality, a kind of masculine maturity.

“Yeah, that’s a real home-made lunch.” He patted his stomach. “There’s nothing like it—a pleasure to die for.”

“That’s true. Valerie is amazing.” Maurice smiled and winked. “You don’t have to die, though. Just drop in more often. But you haven’t answered my question.”

They were sitting in Duval’s parlour, which was rife with contrasts: an antique cabinet and a state-of-the-art home theater, a grandfather clock, its pendulum polished to a shine, and extravagant armchairs made to order by a trendy designer. And of course there were books—not romance novels of the kind produced by Duval’s publishing house but Russian classics he was so fond of—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov. The hefty volumes were hidden behind the glass doors of the bookcase standing by the wall opposite the windows.

“Drop in more often?” Roland chuckled. “You’ll make me into a glutton. In my career, what can be

more dangerous than that? Besides, what makes you think I'll stay in Russia for a whole month? A week there is boring enough to make me sick. As for Valerie—after all these years, haven't you had enough, you old dog? What makes you think that I'm a good match for your daughter? She was not even ten yet when you got this into your head. Don't you think you're part of the reason that she's alone? Look, you outdid yourself to drive her and François apart."

Duval shrugged off the charges, unscathed and even amused.

"Rubbish! Her husband was a bumbling freeloader. Am I to blame? But what does Valerie have to do with this? We were talking about our friendship. It's none of my business, Roland, but I think you are going through a rough patch. You could really use some cheering up. You won't bring Jeanne back. And three years is long enough to get back on your feet. As for your daughter, I'm sure one day Catherine will wisen up and come back home. She has no one but you."

Roland felt a rush of anger but quickly checked himself. Maurice, Maurice—how could one stay angry at him? This gorgeous head of hair like a dandelion and a funny Mark Twain moustache. And blue eyes—as bright and alive as a child's in spite of a web of deep wrinkles around them.

It struck him again that no one was as close to him as Maurice. Yet Ogier choked back his emotions and gave a weary sigh.

"Two children, and I'm a stranger to both. Two people from totally different worlds, with me in the middle. Could this be at the root of it all? Why can't I find a common language with either of them? What is there left for me to do? Have a third child?"

Duval finished his wine and set his glass aside.

"This, incidentally, is a good idea. For instance, have a child with Valerie?"

Ogier sighed and emphatically rolled his eyes.

"What?" Maurice wouldn't let up. "That way you'd most certainly become a glutton. But I digress again—they'll come back. I'm sure they'll come back. Look, after so many years, Sergey has at last contacted you."

Ogier became serious.

"Why, do you figure?"

"The world is simple. Complexities are nothing but fantasy. Money. It's all about money. Sooner or later he would ask for it. From your story, I'd say his life's anything but easy."

"I don't know." Roland shook his head. "Even though I've often been to Russia, I haven't followed his life. Last time I saw him he was five years old. I wouldn't know him now if I ran into him on the street."

"But you said he's a journalist. Do you think he's following in his father's footsteps?"

Ogier scowled.

“No, don’t even go there. I haven’t seen a single article by him. We just have a few common friends. Generally speaking, he hasn’t got the most romantic reputation. Working on call, muckraking. He doesn’t feel up to using his own name, so he tends to make do with pseudonyms. Mostly monkeying around in politics. They must be paying more there. I also know that I have a grandson, seven years old, named Roman. We may make friends one day. I deliberately showed you the letter—there’s something fishy about it. Of course, even though I was hoping and waiting for Sergey to come around sooner or later, in my thoughts I’ve gotten used to life without him. It’s Catherine who really worries me. Her parties, boyfriends, drugs—but there’s nothing I can do. The condo, the furniture—I left it all to my baby girl following the stupid Russian tradition. And her aunts are an unlimited source of money to her. She has no use for me and will never have. I’m just a stranger.”

They were silent for a while, then Duval touched his friend’s shoulder and spoke carefully, picking his words.

“But still it’s no excuse, Roland. To think of it, Catherine may have recoiled from you because of your—how do I put it?—overindulgence in Bacchus’ juice lately?”

Ogier was about to snap but restrained himself. *Overindulgence in Bacchus’ juice—what kind of idea is that! On the other hand, there may be no other way to put it. Especially considering that Maurice is right.*

“Your wife, children,” Maurice went on. “I understand your feelings, but you may end up losing everything: your money, your work.”

“Okay.” Roland could no longer take it. “There may still be time for you to nag me. I’ll be back in a week—don’t hold your breath for a long break! And by the way, didn’t you mention a surprise?”

“A yacht.” Duval smiled smugly. “It’s tiny, but I just couldn’t help myself. I didn’t feel like cruising the coast by car. I called her—you’ll never guess!”

“*Valerie*. It sure takes a Sherlock Holmes to guess this,” smiled Ogier.

At that moment Valerie appeared in the doorway.

“The yacht is meant to be a gift,” she commented.

Thick brown hair tied into a ponytail, a freckled nose, wide hips—by common standards, she was hardly a dazzling woman, and some might not even go so far as to call her beautiful. However, there was something about Valerie Duval that made her irresistible to men and drove them crazy. Perhaps it was all due to her amazing grace, which showed in her every move. Or maybe this was because of her bright, strikingly clear blue eyes, so much like her father’s; or because of her small waist, which she always remembered to emphasize. Or there might be yet another, less obvious secret of her feminine

charm.

“I have no idea what to do with this acquisition,” Valerie continued while clearing the table. “Maybe strike up a romance with the captain?”

“Well, that’s funny.” Ogier hurriedly got up. “But I must go. I still have to pack. Of course, I never put away my suitcase too far. By the way, do you think it might be a good idea to invite Catherine to join our trip?”

Valerie shrugged.

“Why not?” But there was a note of vexation in her voice.

After seeing Ogier to the door, Valerie returned to the parlour.

“Why do you have to do this, Dad? It’s crude to reproach your guest after dinner of abusing alcohol, even if he is your old friend. And this obsession of yours to set me up with Roland—what makes you think that I’m lonely and miserable? Get with the times. You don’t like Remy, I know, but I’m happy with him. I’m content with him and with our relationship.”

“No, I understand everything,” Maurice said drily. “Common-law marriage is so convenient, so easy. No commitments, no sweat. But why can’t you at least present me with a grandson? That wouldn’t encumber you in any way. You could go on with your life, and I could raise him on my own.”

The daughter hesitated.

“You see, you are used to a different lifestyle. But Remy is not to blame, he just can’t!”

“What do you mean, he can’t?” asked Duvall in bewilderment. “You never mentioned this to me.”

“He can’t have children.” Valerie threw up her hands in dismay and hurriedly warded off her father’s sarcasm. “But that’s not a tragedy. We’ll have your grandson in good time—medicine has made great strides recently. But you haven’t really told me what’s up with Roland.”

“He’s flying to Moscow.” Maurice shrugged, somewhat rattled by his daughter’s revelations. “It sounds like a popular plot: the return of the prodigal son. Something about Russia has gotten to Sergey, so the population of France may soon increase by at least three people. As for Roland, he still wears his heart on his sleeve. Even Jeanne was unable to reform him—spoiled him, more likely. For so many years she protected him from all family problems. No wonder he signed everything off to Catherine.”

Valerie sighed and shook her head.

“And yet this is no reason to preach to him—”

“But who else will help him? Don’t you remember this story? I virtually forced him to get a mortgage and to buy a new car. This is essential in his position. Besides, despite his dangerous

addiction, up till now he has been able to keep up with his bills.”

“I see.” His daughter nodded. “And now his son, naively considering his father a rich man, will in blink of an eye upset a boat that is already barely afloat—” After a pause, she sighed in exasperation. “Dad, tell me, is there Slavic blood in you? Or is it just the effect of ‘their’ literature? And why didn’t you call me Katya or Natasha? After all, you made me learn Russian! And now this compulsive obsession to marry me off to a Russian. How did I wrong you?”

“Roland is a good person.” Duval stubbornly shook his head. He had also had a bit too much alcohol at dinner. “I know you’re in love with him. Ethnicity has nothing to do with it. Don’t act like you’re a chauvinist! You know that you can only be happy with him!”

“Daddy, Daddy, you’re so childish,” Valerie sighed. “Please understand, it’s one thing to love a person, but it’s something else entirely to build a life together with him or even just be his lover.”

She wiped the table and brushed the crumbs into an empty plate.

“Why try to connect everything? One day I may tell myself that it’s time to settle down. That’s when I’ll begin to bother my head with such problems—conjure up artificial constructs and pile up trash in the hole. But for now, I prefer to go with the flow and take life as it comes.”

Valerie came up to her father, sat down on the arm of his chair, and gently stroked his shoulder.

“And again, I won’t leave you without a grandchild. And if it’s so important to you, I can seduce Roland. After all, he is just a regular guy and has never been indifferent to the fair sex.”

Roland had passed several pubs, resisting the urge to stop by. After all, he was driving. Besides, at dinner with Maurice he had already had more than his fill. But of course, Duval had no right to intrude into his private life. No matter how close they were.

Overindulgence in Bacchus’ juice, huh? But Duval was right, in spite of the awkward form in which he had cast the thought. He’d said out loud what Ogier had long suspected and was simply afraid to admit.

Ah, Maurice—he’d tried to soften his remark. But quite on the contrary, it came out too sad.

Ogier stopped for a traffic signal. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top of his shirt. Suddenly he felt sick. Could it be that the idea of him abusing alcohol did not occur just to Duval, but also—no, that would be too awful even to think about!

Roland was deep in thought. He didn’t notice that the lights had changed until a car behind him honked. He cast a surly look into the rear-view mirror and started moving.

Where had it all begun? Was it Jeanne’s death that did this to him? His wife’s passing after a brief

illness had not come as a shock to Ogier. Of course, it wasn't like he didn't feel anything at all. At that time he had a rather ill-defined feeling—a feeling that, once again, he was back to square one. It was like a loss, but much stronger, sharper, and more painful. And yet, oddly enough, he also was relieved.

That was true, he had never wished for Jeanne to die, but nonetheless he felt relief. Yet there was once a time when Roland loved this woman! Or thought that he did.

And then relief gave way to emptiness. Perhaps that was the reason that he took to alcohol. Trying to fill that unbearable void.

It was getting dark. A pale twilight was descending on springtime Paris, pierced with the rays from street lamps and neon signs. Passersby were hurrying home. Young people were gathering at the doors of nightclubs. It suddenly occurred to Ogier that his daughter might well be somewhere among them.

Catherine—it could all be because of her. This little spiteful bitch that God had sent him for a daughter.

She was always fuming about something. No matter what Ogier did for her, every time she would say that he had done it all wrong. Yes, she accused him of every imaginable sin. And most often of a lack of understanding.

And he? What did he have to tell her? Yes, he would say, sure, baby, of course, honey—feel free to step over me again—you may wipe your feet on me. As for me, I'll give you the condo and shell out money—

Roland was snapped out of his trance by the pain in his white knuckles. He realized that he was panting and gripping the steering wheel. He cursed under his breath and pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe his brow. He tried to relax.

By God, they used to have a perfect family! Well, almost perfect. Of course, the passion between him and Jeanne might have cooled off with the years, but he had convinced himself that they could do without that passion. With Catherine, they had lived a merry, agreeable, and comfortable life, taking trips to Italy and America. But he never took his family to Russia. Then it was Nice and Côte d'Azur—lately they had spent all their vacations in southern France.

It had all collapsed in an instant. He found that there was no harmony and no happiness, and had never been. Catherine admitted that she'd hated him, her father, since she was a small girl.

Ogier steered his car into a busy street with heavy traffic.

Ah, Paris! This city was once his promised land. Even the street names were like the sweetest music to him: Rue Saint-Jacques, Boulevard Saint-Michel, Rue de Rivoli, Rue Berger, Rue Saint-Denis. And, of course, the Champs-Élysées. For many years now, he had lived in the city of his dreams—in this vast, dirty and heartless city—the same as any other metropolitan area in the world. Well, not quite the

same. No matter what, for Roland, it was his own city, his Paris.

So what had happened with Catherine? Could she be jealous of her mother's relationship with him? Not likely. He was simply a stranger to her, a man from another world—despite their blood ties, despite sharing a home with him for years, despite all his efforts.

Ogier drove into a tunnel. A chain of electric lights flashed past at equal intervals, and a wave of stale air rolled over him through the open window.

A man from another world—but was it just Catherine that thought of him as a stranger? Roland remembered that some of his old friends, colleagues, and acquaintances kept asking him the same question at the start of each conversation: “Well, how're things in Russia?” Roland was sick of that phrase. Tell us how things are in Russia, Monsieur Ogier! Every time he wrestled with the temptation to say something sarcastic, to advise the questioner to watch TV, listen to the radio, or just read newspapers more often. How are things in Russia? Why did he have to know? For many years he'd been living in France, not Russia! But to them he never became a Frenchman. They, too, looked on him as a stranger.

To his former compatriots, he was also a stranger. They were Russians. But what about him? Where did he belong?

Ogier bit his lip. Perhaps Duval was right: he should at least make Catherine financially dependent on him. Yet he just didn't feel up to it. Of course, he had learned the language, laws, and customs of this country, which he had idolized since childhood, but he had never made it as a real Frenchman. Nor did he consider himself Russian any more.

Chapter 2

Alexey Nikolayevich Kukshin closed his laptop and leaned back in his chair. He licked his dry lips and felt a drop of sweat on his right temple. It started rolling down the cheek and onto his chin. He reached out and wiped it with the back of his hand.

When he organized Arrow as a non-profit organization three years ago, the idea that it would one day have every chance to become a real political party was too far-fetched to even cross his mind. It seemed incredible that so many people would believe in him and follow him. And of course, he'd never dreamed that one day he would be in possession of such a powerful weapon.

Kukshin leaned forward again, pulled a memory stick from the notebook, and placed it on the table before him. His hands trembled, and to stop it, he rested his palms on the armrests.

The memory stick was tiny, just about three centimeters by one and a half. Had Kukshin not known about its contents, it probably wouldn't have held his attention for long. But now he was transfixed. He thought of this little piece of plastic and metal as something that could suddenly change the destiny of a vast country.

Protests? The sacking of dozens of major political figures? Perhaps even a new revolution? At that moment he could hardly fathom the consequences that the disclosure of this information could precipitate. What would be the reaction of the people if they found out that for years they had been cynically robbed, humiliated, and sneered at? That a handful of bureaucrats and traders had all along benefited from telling lies on TV, in newspapers, to people's very faces? That it was never about national interests, as every political decision was first and foremost driven by an insatiable greed for money? That this money was to keep going into the already overflowing pockets of a small group of people retaining an iron grip on power?

Unable to take the strain, Kukshin rose from his chair and began to pace his office. It was a small room, so he could barely make half a dozen steps in one direction before turning around and walking towards the opposite wall. This seemed to set him on edge even more.

At last he went back to the table, poured himself a glass of water from a decanter, and drank it in one gulp.

On the other hand, Kukshin kept ruminating, should he really be surprised by any of this? Had it ever been different, with any government, be it under the tsars or the secretaries-general? No matter who was at the helm, they all invariably sought to line their own pockets in one way or another—the temptation was too great to resist. And the very power over human lives intoxicated, bringing with it a

sense of impunity.

So was it any different now? Perhaps in the world's most developed countries political powers had in recent decades taken on civilized forms, learned to self-regulate and to serve the public good. By the beginning of the twenty-first century the phrase *human rights* already held considerable sway and was in many cases backed up by generally reliable legal frameworks.

Kukshin grimly chuckled at this thought. Perhaps this was the case in developed countries, but Russia was not yet one of them.

He went to the window and looked out. Having lived here for many years, he still couldn't get used to the view. The sight of Moscow in the evening hours was, as ever, fascinating in its magnificence. The waterfront was dotted with lights, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Kremlin towers in the distance. It was not just about the contribution of this view to the dizzying price of his three-bedroom apartment. Rather, it was about an amazing surge of energy and a sense of empowerment that Kukshin felt every time he looked out of his windows onto the city he loved—Moscow, in all its glory.

Perhaps it was this view that had motivated his revolt at the time when, under the pretext of renovations, his whole family was temporarily relocated to Yuzhnoye Butovo, the very edge of the teeming metropolis. That was almost five years ago, but Kukshin to this day clearly remembered the indignation that overwhelmed him the moment he realized that, almost a year after their relocation, their return to the old apartment wasn't in the cards. At that very moment something in him had changed forever. He used to think of patience as an indisputable advantage that allowed him to avoid taxing conflicts. Since that day, however, this conviction had disappeared without a trace.

He had started making rounds of government agencies, involved the press, sought out other people who had been illegally relocated to the outskirts of Moscow, and eventually he succeeded. The family got their apartment back and were offered apologies from the mayor's office. Yet by then Alexey Kukshin, once just a doctoral candidate in physical and mathematical sciences and a fellow at an institute for low temperature research, had become a different person. He could no longer put up with underhandedness, theft, and corruption. He had lost his patience.

The grassroots movement that he spearheaded was initially content with the righting of isolated wrongs. Their volunteers helped people to compose formal petitions to state agencies, offered consultations on financial and legal matters, organized special training sessions on how to communicate with government officials, and even raised money for the elderly and the needy. Very soon all those people inspired by their successes and newfound hope started flocking to Kukshin's movement. This prompted the idea of an organization that would unite people from different social backgrounds all over the country.

And that's how it happened. In little less than two years, Arrow brought together hundreds of thousands of followers, opening dozens of local chapters from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, with major offices in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, and Novosibirsk. The organization now also dealt with social support and security activities, trade and manufacturing, financial literacy, and investment. Everywhere it was getting support and assistance from all kinds of people, with perhaps the exception of civil servants. The latter didn't at first take the movement led by Kukshin seriously, so it may have been thanks to bureaucratic arrogance that Arrow got the chance reach the scale where it could no longer remain inconspicuous. As a result, a little more than half a year ago, reports about Arrow began surfacing in the media, and Kukshin started drawing attention as a potential political leader.

At first he was a little scared. He had worked as a university lecturer in the past, but he felt out of place in the spotlight. The scale of events to which the media interest could raise him was especially intimidating. Little by little, however, Kukshin got accustomed to this idea. He started taking lessons in public speaking and took several leadership and business communication courses. Within a short while he started feeling quite confident in public. Whatever would come his way, Alex Kukshin knew one thing: he did not intend to back down. This had been his firm conviction right up till yesterday morning, when Sergey Yazev knocked on his door at Arrow's head office on Sushevsky Vahl.

"May I?"

"Yes?" Kukshin looked up from his papers and nodded. Yazev came in and closed the door behind him.

The visitor approached the desk, took a chair, and stared at his feet as if not knowing where to start. He was pale and had the overall appearance of a man who had spent a sleepless night. Yet Kukshin didn't seem to notice at first.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked mechanically, going back to his papers.

"Kind of—"

Sergey Yazev was in charge of public relations at Arrow and had recently taken an active part in youth work. A former journalist, he was usually quick on the draw. But now he was clearly straining to say something, which he was unable to put into words.

After a while Kukshin raised his eyes from the papers with a quizzical look.

Yazev only managed to muster a shrug.

"I don't know how to say this—I guess you'd better see for yourself."

He put a small memory stick on the desk.

Kukshin took the memory stick with a look of bewilderment and turned it over in his hands. He then silently plugged it into the laptop standing on his desk.

“Take a look, for example, at any file from the Schematics folder,” prompted Sergey.

Kukshin followed his advice and for some time silently mulled over the contents of the file. At first his face looked perplexed. This expression soon gave way to astonishment and then to focused, intense attention. He was silent for about three minutes.

“Where did you get this?”

“Well—do you remember our presentation at the Youth Palace last week? While you were taking questions from the crowd, a boy suddenly pushed his way from the back and shoved it in my hand. Just a kid, eight to ten years old. It was plain that someone had sent him. Someone who didn’t want to be spotted. Which of course is understandable considering that this memory stick has ready materials that can be used to compromise almost every member of the Russian power structure.”

“Wait, wait...” Kukshin suddenly lost his composure. “Are you saying—”

One after another, he started opening the files, which bore the graphics of corporate affiliations, then switched to registration documents, financial statements, and photographs showing prominent Russian politicians and entrepreneurs.

“This isn’t possible,” muttered Kukshin and then repeated, “This is not possible—”

“Unfortunately, it is,” Yazev grimly chuckled .

“But wait, what if—what if this is a hoax? Some kind of spoof that’s all over the Internet?”

“Well, there are some rumours on the Internet, but I haven’t been able to find these particular documents out there yet, at least not in the public domain. Now, whether or not it’s a hoax is not such a simple question—”

Yazev went silent, as if pondering something. But Kukshin kept staring at him, and at last Sergey resumed his train of thought.

“I have analyzed a couple of graphics there. Let’s say, if someone at the top wanted to rake in good money, these manipulations would work like a charm. It would all be legitimate: large stakes in Russian oil and gas companies and such, a chain of offshore corporations owning one another. Eventually they’d all melt away, as usual, into the Swiss banks—through a network of international firms scattered throughout Europe. In essence, this would all be absolutely legal.”

“And in reality?” Kukshin interrupted impatiently. “What do you think?”

Sergey shrugged.

“In the grand scheme of things, it has always been obvious that they steal. Always did and will

probably continue to. In Russia, this seems to be the only motive behind all our power scuffles. Besides, the results of privatization were no secret to anyone, so it's not surprising. On the other hand —" Sergey continued after a pause, now slowly, carefully choosing each word. "Even if at least half of this information were true, which I am inclined to believe—consider it some sort of journalist's instinct or whatever—it doesn't matter.

"Long story short, where would we go with this? To the Prosecutor General's Office? They'd put us behind bars in no time. To the media? It's all owned by the same characters who appear in these very files. I'm afraid we would never even get as far as a mockup for our article. Or, perhaps we should found our own newspaper? Or else just preach on the street?

He continued, "Well, the good news is that we're unlikely to get killed—it's no longer popular, and there's no particular need for that. It'll suffice to set us up as buffoons. This wouldn't even require any argument. The idea that we're crazy will be unassailable when the newspapers, radio, and TV stations start hammering it in. In the worst-case scenario, we'll be charged with libel, and something tells me that the court's decision won't be in our favour."

Kukshin leaned back in his chair and frowned. He had nothing to counter with.

"You do understand," Yazev went on, "that in a country where the government has unlimited powers, theft on this scale becomes legitimate. Moreover, in such a context we'll be—and may already be—the only culprits in the story. Seriously, I wouldn't be awfully surprised to suddenly find out that we're already under surveillance."

Kukshin frowned and anxiously looked over the office.

"D'you figure this could be a setup?" he asked, closing the file windows and pulling the memory stick from his computer.

Sergey shrugged once again and sighed with a nod in the direction of the memory stick.

"I think that whoever handed us this hot potato had a very clear understanding of the possible fallout from these files."

Kukshin bit his lip, then rose from his chair and began pacing the room. When he was under stress or preoccupied with some question, he just couldn't sit still.

"We must do something," he muttered under his breath. "Must undertake something—"

Kukshin came to a sudden stop in the middle of the room and looked Yazev straight in the eyes.

"What if this is our chance? The one and only?" He raised his hand with the memory stick. "I understand that the most prudent thing for us to do now would be to destroy this and forget about these documents—but what if—if there were a way to put this information to such use to really make a difference, you know?"

Kukshin resumed his frantic pacing of the room. He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his forehead, then mechanically rubbed the top of his head and smoothed back his hair.

“There must be some way! More or less safe—”

“Safe—I wouldn’t count on it,” sighed Yazev and added after a pause, “As for the chance, I think you’re right. We’re not likely to get a second chance like this.”

Kukshin looked at Sergey and noticed that he had grown even paler, yet in his eyes there was a look of firm determination.

Kukshin’s mood was somewhat different now, two days after this conversation. As he looked out on evening Moscow from the window of his home office, he felt that his zeal was yielding ground to fear by the minute.

On that day he and Yazev had decided upon reflection that it would certainly be futile to count on the Russian media. On the other hand, it might not be a bad idea to test the waters with the foreign press—all the more so as over the past month several prominent political journalists from the U.S. and Europe had shown interest in Arrow and asked Kukshin for an interview. Of course, they should hold off on giving any loud statements. First they would have to try and get at least some more or less reliable proof of the authenticity of the materials in their possession. Sergey took on the organization of a small investigation with a couple of reliable people from the security department of Arrow. He knew of course that for the sake of safety they should keep the number of people who knew about the contents of the memory stick as small as possible, so he decided that, besides him and Kukshin, no one should have full access to these materials for the time being.

As for Kukshin, right after their conversation he had summoned his secretary and instructed her to arrange interviews with all foreign journalists who had wished to meet with him. He asked for all the meetings to be spaced out as evenly as possible during the next two weeks.

Yazev then made a copy of the flash drive. After that, they parted.

And now Kukshin felt a mounting fear. For the first time in his life he was facing an adversary whose forces were a thousand or even a million times greater than those of himself and his entire organization. Up until now Arrow had only come up against individual bureaucrats who were getting by on penny bribes. Tackling the big shots standing behind the files from the memory stick meant biting off more than they could chew. This time, the annual revenue at stake was on the order of billions of dollars. It would be naïve to doubt that the crooks would spare no means to keep those billions. And they surely had ample means.

Feeling that his throat was dry again, Kukshin returned to the desk to get another glass of water.

He knew that making one wrong move or calling too much attention to himself and to the files from the cursed memory stick would get him crushed like a bug. This would be presented as punishment for his sins, which would suddenly crop up in abundance.

But then what should he do? Forget the goddamn files and leave everything as it was? Allow a handful of thieves to go on cashing in their booty and smuggling it out of the country? Ignore the fact that this money could help millions of people across Russia, people who lived in poverty and had lost all hope for a better life?

This thought worked Alex Kukshin up into a state of unbearable disgust with himself. No, he was no longer able to do that. Now it had become a matter of his dignity—

At this moment the door opened to reveal the face of his wife.

“Alyosha?” she called. “The twins are asleep. Are you coming to bed? I don’t want to turn in without you.”

She came inside, and Kukshin instinctively whisked the memory stick from the table.

“Sure, I’m coming.”

He turned to face her and forced a weary smile.

She came up to her husband and reached up to stroke his cheek.

“Are you okay?” she asked as she noticed the anxiety on his face.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, perhaps too hastily. He then repeated—this time trying to speak in a calmer voice, “Yes, all is—well—you know what, no need to wait for me. I’ll be with you soon.”

“Okay.” She nodded and turned toward the door.

However, Kukshin suddenly had an idea.

“Listen, how’s your cousin doing? The one in Canada?”

“He seems fine. We just spoke on the phone last week. Why?”

“Oh, no particular reason. I’ve just been thinking, a while ago he called us to come over, right?”

“Well, yes, he’s still calling.”

“That’s perfect! Why don’t you and the twins pay him a visit? As for me, I have too much on my plate. I’m up to my neck in work, and I’ll be away from home much of the time. Also, this would be great for the twins, right? New impressions, and whatnot. You too could unwind a bit—”

His wife turned to him again, then came up and looked into his eyes.

“Alyosha, what’s going on?”

He wanted to say something but just shrugged, then drew her closer to him and hugged her.

“Nothing—nothing much—it’s all right.”

His voice was shaking.

Chapter 3

On the plane, Roland was dying for a drink, but he didn't want to give his son a bad impression on their first meeting. Besides, he knew how dangerous a slightest lapse in judgment could be at Sheremetyevo Airport. Certainly some minor details were different from one trip to the next, but in essence the situation was always the same.

On his very first arrival he was in high spirits, humming The Beatles' "Back in the U.S.S.R." as he looked out for KGB agents who were supposed to put him under constant surveillance. Instead, a sociable and chatty "owner-driver" had taken him to the nearest wood, where the foreign dupe had long been eagerly awaited. That time they'd just let him go. Without his luggage and money, of course. Back then murder was still subject to capital punishment, so not many people wanted to take the risk.

Having learned the hard way, Roland later preferred to take the express bus, no matter how long he had to wait in the line, all the time trying to be as inconspicuous as possible among other passengers.

This time, however, he didn't have to stand in line. Right at the exit, he saw a sheet of paper with his uneven hand-written name on it. Roland raised his eyes from the sign and looked at the man holding it.

A tall figure with a square chin and bushy eyebrows—every morning Ogier saw in the mirror something similar to what he beheld now. Sergey was so much like him that at first he couldn't believe his eyes. To think of it, even this meeting seemed unbelievable to Roland.

"Hello," said Sergey in a slightly hoarse voice.

"Well, hello—"

There was a brief pause, during which they carefully regarded each other. Sergey was the first to look away.

"How was your flight?"

"Not bad. Good, actually."

"I decided to meet you, just in case."

No matter how they tried, they couldn't help drawing some attention. Even though they were parked in a paid lot, a brawny fellow with close-cropped hair watched them with a wry smile as Sergey checked under the hood of his beat-up grey Niva and closely examined its wheels.

"So, there's still this monkey business going on?" asked Roland when they got on the highway.

"There is some," his son reluctantly answered. "Not as much as before, of course. But they may tail you to the house or pull you over if it gets around that you're loaded, or that I am competition—knocking down their cabbings fares."

“How’s your mother doing?” asked Roland after a pause. “Getting on well? Still hating me?”

Sergey chuckled and smoothed his buzz cut.

“She hates you as much as ever. She thinks you’ve ruined her life. But the truth is that she never pined for you. She decided that you were as good as dead to her, and that’s also what she was trying to impress on me for years. You probably know that her second husband was an architect. He had a cushy job, albeit a rather nerve-wracking one. He was struck down by a heart attack in his prime.”

Sergey sighed with a frown.

“Now Ludmila Valeryevna has got another mate: broad as a barn door and already flaunting a beer belly. But he’s got a good heart—at least that’s what he seems like. He works for a space agency. They live modestly but seem in love. He was a widower, too, so they hit it off pretty fast. I had my doubts at first, thinking this fling would be over in a month or two, but it turned out quite differently.”

He cast a sideways look at his father without turning away from the road.

“We don’t see each other a whole lot. They live in Korolyov. That’s close at hand, of course, but not close enough for frequent trips. So we mostly stay in touch by phone. As for your visit, I didn’t tell her. It was strictly my own initiative.”

Sergey paused, hesitated, and then took the plunge.

“I—you see, my wife and I recently got divorced. I left everything to her. And then—I fell in love, unexpectedly—and we have a daughter, your granddaughter—”

Roland gaped at his son, then shook his head and gave a perplexed laugh.

“Damn! Who would’ve thought that!”

“You’re laughing?” Sergey grimaced.

“That’s not the point! Imagine, I even envy you a little. Our situations right now have a lot in common, but you have bounced back quite quickly, and I haven’t recovered to this day. But you’ve cheered me up! A granddaughter? That’s wonderful! I guess I won’t likely see my grandson, though?”

Sergey nodded.

“If only from a distance. They live in a mansion. With security. You know, some thought that I married for money. Except that I came out of this marriage without a shirt on my back.”

“Well, and how’s your new wife?”

“Ah, she’s a very young girl. Barely eighteen. But she loves me. And I love her, too. You know how they say: one cannot love and be wise. My father-in-law is an engineer, and my mother-in-law is a teacher. They live out of Moscow—in the middle of nowhere. But they are nice to me, and they can’t get enough of their granddaughter.

“But how did *you* end up in such a situation? You are a celebrity, as I just recently found out.”

“In my own circles,” Roland pointed out, much pleased that his son paid him his due. “You want to know how this happened to me? Well, like you, I signed everything off. Not to my wife but to my daughter. My wife died three years ago. I took out a bunch of loans. Now I’m just getting by. But these are my problems; they shouldn’t concern you in any way. Even my best friend doesn’t know. But no matter how hard up I was, I always transferred a quarter of my pay to a special bank account. This is your money. I don’t know how much there is now, but it should be a substantial amount. In all fairness, though, you should somehow split it with your mother.”

“Yeah, we’ll share,” Sergey murmured meditatively. “Say, you must have had it hard ‘there’ at times?”

“Life there has its own challenges,” sighed Roland. “As for the money, I offered it to you more than once. I even tried to send it, but to no avail.”

Sergey nodded pensively. Without taking his eyes off the road, he noticed from the corner of his eye that Ogier was scrutinizing him. He, too, felt like turning his head and taking a good look at the man sitting next to him. The man who was his father. However, Sergey couldn’t bring himself to do it. He was aware that they were very similar in appearance, but for some odd reason he was scared of this similarity.

Roland, on the contrary, kept watching his son in growing disbelief. He remembered him as a somewhat grim five-year-old kid, and now he saw a mature man before him, who, however, had not developed a sunnier disposition. Still, for a split second it seemed to Ogier that he had been next to his son for the past thirty years, that he had never left. It was as though there had never been another family, Paris, or Fiumicino airport, where he had defected.

As if reading his thoughts, Sergey suddenly exclaimed, “Let’s start over, Father. Now that we’ve met, I’d like to know the whole truth. Not just Mom’s version.”

“Do you think we have enough time?” Roland chuckled sadly. “We’re almost there.”

“That’s okay. We can pull over,” said Sergey. “There’s no rush.”

“So that’s a trial. There’s no escape from a trial,” Roland joked darkly. “I hope you’ll judge me as a son—fairly, rather than Soviet-style?”

Ogier had no desire to relive those bitter distant memories, but Sergey’s glum silence left him no choice. Where to start? With that night in Rome when he’d slept like a log, or with the next morning when he still had no inkling of the choice he’d make later that day, which, even to him, would come as a shock?

“You want me to start at the beginning? Well, this is really going to be a long story,” Roland sighed.

The waiter brought them two cups of coffee and warm puff pastry with strawberry jam. There were few people in the cafe. The father and son sat at the farthest table by the window facing the parking lot.

“I was a regular boy. Like everybody else, I went to school, was a young pioneer, and collected recyclable paper and metal.”

Ogier took a sip of coffee and found it quite decent.

“Later, I joined the Young Communist League and moved up from collecting recyclables to harvesting potatoes as a student team member. I got married in my third year at university. When you were born, I decided to stay in the programme. Upon graduation, I got an appointment as an engineer. As a YCL member I once got delegated to Italy. I was an all-around activist, you know. Before that trip, my wife and I had travelled to the Bulgarian sea coast. So for me, to once again find myself by the sea was more than I could ask for. I had never been a dissident, but, like many intellectuals, I was skeptical about those in power, to put it mildly. Certainly I found Italy delightful, but not much else. A lot of things about it were attractive, but, then, quite a few seemed alarming—”

Roland drank some more coffee and took a bite of his puff.

“Our guide was a former prostitute from Odintsovo named Tanya. I still remember her. She was one of the so-called ‘centre-line’ escorts, you know, who had been working Tverskaya Street—then Gorky Street. She was a beautiful bitch, got to give her that. Married to an Italian—a trivial story.

“She often poked fun at us, knowing our daily struggles, but she was quite professional about her responsibilities. Just once, the night before our departure, while spending the night out with us, she advised half-jokingly, ‘Defecting? If anyone wants to beat it, there’ll be no one to stop them. You just have to get to the airport, check in your luggage, and get your documents processed, like everyone else. And then slowly walk out of the door, get a taxi—whoever comes looking for you, might as well try to catch the wind in a net.’

“Certainly we all laughed at that in unison: yeah, like hell we’re gonna bite your KGB bait, you Odintsovo whore! We are all hand-picked, checked, and double-checked here—you won’t get us on your empty hook!”

Roland glanced at his son out of the corner of his eye, thinking that he had already managed to bore him with excessive detail. But the other listened very carefully, as if envisioning himself in his father’s shoes at that moment.

“Are you sure you want to know all of this?” Ogier asked, just in case.

“Yes, very much,” nodded Sergey, intently staring at his father.

“Well,” sighed Roland. “Then you probably wouldn’t mind even more details. Like I said, we were

all checked and double-checked—just regular Soviet people. We took much more interest in shopping than in local attractions. I remember they exchanged thirty roubles for each of us—that’s all we could count on by the Soviet rules. But what could be bought with such a tiny amount? Yet one must take into account the psychology of a tourist from the mysterious ChiChiChiPi—that’s how they say USSR in Italian. Our tours of every city started with the market, the ‘mercato’. We didn’t trust the so-called ‘discount stores’ where Tanya and the driver took us in exchange for the store owners’ bribes. And I acted like everyone else, never standing out from the rest: fussing, running from shop to shop, trying to make a few extra pennies in exchange for cigarettes, vodka, and souvenirs—”

Roland paused, looking at the coffee grounds at the bottom of his cup. Although his body was still in the little cafe at the outskirts of Moscow, his thoughts were at that moment far, far away in space and time.

Memories—only now Ogier realized that they had never left him, not even for a day.

“When we got to Leonardo da Vinci airport at Fiumicino, I suddenly felt like a robot or a zombie. Without thinking that it could be a plain provocation, I acted out the goddamn ‘Odintsovo’ scenario. I even saved up my taxi fare ahead of time. Earlier, I got scared out of my wits when I got lost in Venice during an excursion: what’ll happen if I never get reunited with my ‘fellows’? Now, however, I acted like a seasoned conspirator—”

“And after? Nostalgia, regrets about your act?”

“Nostalgia?” chuckled Roland. “My son, don’t believe those who speak or write about these things. Nostalgia was the feeling that gnawed at the first wave of Russian emigrants. Indeed, they had something to pine over. They had lost a country that, at some point, for a brief moment, soared up spiritually and intellectually above other countries, and, long after, kept shining that spirit and intellect on the rest of the world. What did we, the third wave, have to cry out for? Our Big Jail?” He sighed and looked out the window. “However, I had the brains to realize that I wasn’t in for a bed of roses. And since it was God’s will to send me a chance to live a free life, to live as I pleased, it would be extremely stupid to pass up this chance.”

“But how did you get to Paris?” Sergey asked impatiently.

“I had to work my tail off for that. At that time, Italy had the biggest transit point where we were constantly questioned, recruited, photographed, tested, and provoked. You wouldn’t believe what they did to us there! Anyway, the pressure was pretty hard—it sure wasn’t a bed of roses. Worst of all, the fear of being sent back was, like the sword of Damocles, constantly hanging over our heads. Of course, our ‘fellow-citizens’ didn’t waste any time. We got frequent visits from the embassy spooks. They were bullying, threatening, and making references to my wife and son. They showed me Ludmila’s letters

where she tried to persuade me to return, demanding that I choose between emigration and family. On the other hand, the Italian officials and CIA spooks saw me as a potential spy. Soon the attitudes to me started shifting. The embassy left me alone, and propaganda began. They called me to Australia, to Canada, to the States. I also had the option of staying in Italy. But I was firm as a stone: France—I would accept nothing but France. And in France—only Paris.”

“Paris?” Sergey gave a little smile. “Why Paris, of all places?”

“Why Paris?” Roland smiled and shrugged. “It had been my dream since childhood, I guess. Besides, I already knew a little bit of French—more than of other languages, anyways. But of course I had no time for deliberating. I had to make up my mind, and my decision was not only important in and of itself—it determined the rest of my life.”

“And then? What happened next?”

“Next?” Roland remembered himself in those days with a condescending smile. “I was young and had a poor sense of the situation around me. But I was animated by some inherent instinct. I immediately rejected all options involving Russian communities and set my mind on becoming a full-fledged citizen of the country that was kind enough to give me asylum. But it wasn’t easy to live in a foreign country without any help—I had to take any and every job: a waiter at a bistro, a porter at the market.”

“So how did you manage to get out of the gutter?” The earlier tension was gone from Sergey’s expression. On the contrary, he appeared to be in a reverie—as if he himself was now in Paris, where he had never had the chance to go.

“I honed my French, learned English, took different courses, attended discussion clubs, and quickly got myself a girlfriend. But I don’t know what would’ve happened to me without Duval. I remember him laughing so hard that he nearly dropped out of his chair when I brought him a novel in French, if you can imagine. But he saw something in it, something unorthodox, and he hired me. First as a courier, then into the sales department. And when I got proficient enough in the language, he found a place for me in the newspaper. And that’s where I was forged as Roland Ogier—a major journalist not just France but even in all Europe. My other dream came true as well: I traveled to almost every corner of the world. For some time I was quite well off, if not rich. Even now my situation is not too bad. As for my personal life—well, things will eventually look up here as well, I think—”

They drove up to an inconspicuous five-storey building and entered a stairwell where the walls were inscribed with swear words, political slogans, and the names of rock bands.

“It must be odd for you to see these artistic displays?” asked Sergey. “This is how we live.”

“The filth seems odd. If we take Italy, for example, every surface there is scribbled over with all sorts of messages, and people have given up fighting that. But when it comes to filth—beliefs or interests have nothing to do with filth. It’s the first omen of decline and spiritual decay.”

“Russia without filth?” shrugged Sergey. “Is that even possible?”

“Maybe it is,” muttered Ogier.

But there was no time to take this idea any further, since at that moment they entered Sergey’s domicile—a tiny room in a run-down, shabby communal apartment.

“We’re renting it from a friend of mine,” Sergey offered glumly in response to his father’s surprise. “It’s not much, but Mother was so fiercely opposed to our marriage that she kicked me out of my own apartment. To be exact, I cancelled my registration there when I moved in with my first wife, but that’s no excuse.”

The room’s interior was modest, to put it mildly: two twin beds pushed together, a dining table and four chairs, not counting an assortment of small cabinets. In the corner was a hand-me-down crib with a one-year-old girl in it who was curiously staring out at Roland through the rods. She had blond hair and pouty lips. Even though, in her case, it was too soon to talk about obvious similarities, Ogier felt that the girl bore a striking resemblance to Sergey.

The girl’s mother was also in the room. From where she stood at the window, she looked at Roland with surprise and a sort of cautious curiosity. Tall, thin, and very pale, she seemed taciturn, almost timid, and certainly not spoiled by life.

“Veronica,” Sergey hastened to introduce his wife. “And this is our Lyubushka.”

At this, Lyubushka happily extended her arms towards her father with a gleeful giggle.

Roland noticed his son’s hesitation—whether or not to call his father by his real, Russian name—and rushed to the rescue.

“Roland. Roland Ogier.”

Yet Sergey couldn’t resist the temptation to at least make a joke about it.

“Which makes me not Sergey Yurievitch Yazev but none less than Monsieur Serge Ogier—”

“Will you have dinner with us?” Veronica quietly interrupted her husband’s jesting. “I baked a cake. With apples. How do you want me to call you, Monsieur Ogier, Roland or Father?”

“Just Roland would be the easiest, I think,” smiled Ogier.

In France Roland had become accustomed to paying much attention to food culture. In Russia he was prepared to temper his culinary sensibilities for a while. However, the dinner seemed quite good to him. Ogier even noted that he found some special pleasure in the taste of the buckwheat porridge,

pickled wild mushrooms, and rye bread—the simple food that was so common in Russia but was hard to come by, for example, in Europe. As he was enthusiastically packing away the meal, he was casting grateful glances at Veronica, who responded with a befuddled smile and looked away uncomfortably.

“I wonder where you found her,” Roland couldn’t help asking when he and Sergey volunteered to wash the dishes in the kitchen.

“She’s from Kimry. Ever heard of that place? In Soviet times, I once stopped by there when I was taking a boat trip to Leningrad. Honestly, I’d never seen such poverty. We met in Moscow. Once while walking down the street and thinking sad thoughts about my life, I suddenly heard a question, ‘Do you know where Moscow State University is?’ I answered, ‘I can take you there. And whereabouts do you come from?’

“You see, it’s not about ‘where’ or ‘where from’—it’s about personality. Apart from deficiencies, of which each of us has more than enough, she has a lot of merits. Someone may find her naive, but to me she’s pure. Others will consider her simple-minded—to me, she’s genuine. To some, she will seem awkward, but I say that I’ve never seen a more graceful girl than her—”

At this, Sergey checked himself and almost blushed.

“You are probably surprised to hear this.”

“No, not at all.”

“I love her. Can you see that?”

“Yes, I understand,” smiled Roland, somewhat moved by his son’s confessions.

When they were done with the dishes, Ogier suddenly felt the full weight of the fatigue from the flight, which had been holding off since the landing. He declared that he must go look for a hotel.

“A hotel? Why not stay with us?” inquired Veronica with naive surprise.

“This is how things work!” chuckled Sergey and added with a touch of sarcasm. “His status doesn’t allow him to live in a communal apartment.” He then turned to Roland. “I’ll drive you—no need to spend money on a taxi.”

In the car they maintained an awkward silence for a time. Sergey took a roundabout route through yards and back alleys, then turned into the avenue, and raced in the direction of the downtown. Dusk slowly descended on Moscow.

Roland finally ventured to break the silence.

“Listen, is her father really an engineer? I thought you mentioned that.”

“Well, I lied,” smiled Sergey. “He’s a tractor driver, a common tractor driver. He works in the fields

from morning till night. In his spare time he makes moonshine and is a master of that art. Of course he drinks it, too. By the way, he's in good health—pretty sure he'll outlive me. The mother is a quiet, pious woman. No, not a teacher. A milkmaid or cattle tender—not sure what they call that. Her husband often beats her up, which both of them perceive as a mere fact of life. They have eight children of their own and countless relatives in the extended family. To put it short, she's not a countess, if that's what you're asking.”

Ogier was silent. He felt that his son needed to vent his frustration.

Sergey continued, “But none of these matters. You see, she practically saved my life. After the divorce, I took to drinking and was quickly nearing rock bottom. I got kicked out from the editorial board of the Moskovsky Komsomolets, which I regret to this day. So I would have spent every last penny on alcohol, had I not met Nika—”

Sergey went silent. He had now turned into the Garden Ring and instantly got stuck in a slow-moving traffic jam. None of them spoke for a couple of minutes, and then Ogier shook his head and grinned. “So it turns out that you and I follow the same path, even though we live in different countries. I broke down some time after my wife fell ill, and since then I've been hooked on alcohol. To this day, I sometimes lose it and go on a drinking binge—” Ogier sighed and bit his lip. “But everything is going to be different now. I've got a son that I love, a lovely daughter-in-law, and an absolutely wonderful granddaughter. I've got something to live for—”

Roland turned his head towards the side window and secretly brushed off a tear welling up in the corner of his eye.

But Sergey was intently watching the road and only nodded grimly in answer to his father's words. “Yes—you—please take care of them—”

Ogier was about to ask what Sergey meant by “of them,” rather than “of us,” but his thoughts suddenly took a different turn.

“Listen, as I understand, none of my money can make much difference for you here—it won't simply be enough. Why don't you emigrate? Have you ever considered that?”

Sergey gave a faint smile, but there was a shade of bitterness in it.

“Well, how is that better? What good is this money abroad?” he said after a pause.

Roland shrugged as he weighed the options.

“A small cottage, an average car, and a modest reserve to let you learn a new occupation. That's it. The rest is up to you. In terms of time, it would take a couple of years. With my help, of course. What do you think of this proposition?”

Sergey, however, left the question without an answer.

“Well, and you? Aren’t you planning to remarry in the nearest future? You’re not old yet.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of planning on that,” Ogier chuckled.

He suddenly thought of Valerie and Maurice with his annoying jokes. And he realized that he missed them. Both of them. However, he immediately rushed his thoughts back to his son.

“You probably understand now why I let my life get out of hand recently. But today I’ve found a reason to get myself back to normal. In any case, I’ll be able to take care of you. Well, what do you think? Have you made up your mind?”

“I made up my mind a long time ago,” Sergey smiled enigmatically, but his smile was somehow not too cheerful.

Roland decided not to push any further questions. The emerging trust between him and his son was too important to him.

Could it be that, after their long separation, he would finally have a normal family? A son, a granddaughter, and even this simple-minded but nice daughter-in-law. He would re-live the relocation challenges and, once again, dive into the survival struggle.

“And what would I be able to do there?” asked Sergey. “Work as a journalist?”

“No, not likely, there’s a clear oversupply of journalists there. Besides, you’d need to have proficiency in foreign languages. I’d recommend that you learn programming—provided that you’re comfortable around computers, of course. That’s a guaranteed source of income for a long time. In any case, I have a lot of friends and connections in many countries around the world. It wouldn’t be a problem to get you a job, as long as you’re interested in it.”

Sergey nodded. “Okay, we’ll be able to talk about it some more.”

“Of course,” agreed Roland. “Just don’t put it off for too long. By the way, what are your plans for tomorrow night? Do you want the three of us to go out to a restaurant—me, you and Veronica?”

They had already arrived at the hotel, and Sergey slowed down at the entrance.

He shrugged with a grimace, “You know, we seldom go to restaurants—”

“Well, that’ll be an occasion to begin your reformation.” Ogier didn’t miss a beat. “You should start getting used to life abroad. You see, restaurants are a cultural institution there—especially in France. Besides, we must celebrate our reunion!”

Chapter 4

Roland dialed Sergey's number and held the phone to his ear. He looked up and squinted at the sunlight pouring through the glazed roof of the shopping center.

The boutique where Ogier was standing was on the top floor of the building. He could see the stairs and gallery through the store windows, with busy shoppers rushing from door to door. But here, in the air-conditioned showroom of the store, with a floral scent floating in the air and soft music playing, it was calm and quiet.

"Hello?" He heard Sergey's voice on the phone.

"Hi, Seryozha, it's me. Can you give me your exact address, please? I've found you some clothes for tonight. They'll be delivered to you in a couple of hours."

"Look, I've been thinking—do we have to do it? Well, the whole restaurant thing?"

"Absolutely! I won't take no for an answer."

"Well, it's not even about me." Sergey hesitated again. "It's Veronica. Well, why don't you talk to her yourself?"

Then Veronica's excited voice came on the phone.

"I just wanted to ask you, since we're having such a big night out, if you would mind if I invited my best friend to join us. I'm just asking. If you can't, that's all right—"

He heard the sounds of scuffling, a muffled dispute, and then Sergey came on the phone once again.

"There you have it! You see, she's just like a child."

Roland chuckled.

"Well, put her back on the phone."

"I don't insist," Veronica started apologizing. "If you can't, just say so."

"That's fine, your friend may come along. What size is she?"

"Size? Don't worry, she's not fat, about the same size as I."

"That is, size small or medium, about 180-185 centimeters tall?"

"She's 172, to be precise, a bit shorter than me. And she's more like size M."

"And her waistline and hips? Is she smaller or bigger than you?"

"Don't you worry! She is quite good-looking. She's even slimmer than me at the waist and hips. I'm a sweet tooth, you see. And also, Sergey likes me better this way."

"Okay, that's fine. Now give me your exact address—"

Ogier finished writing in his address book, hung up, and turned around. A female store assistant,

who had been patiently waiting a few steps away, approached him with a polite smile. He smiled back and shrugged.

“It looks like I’m going to need one more evening gown.”

Having picked out the clothes, Roland paid with his credit card and ordered the purchase to be delivered to the address that Veronica gave him.

Back out in the street, he first wanted to walk to the hotel. But instead, he felt a strange urge to dive into the tangle of the narrow streets and alleys of the center of Moscow. And, once there, he couldn’t help himself—he just kept going.

Roland was walking fast, looking with keen eyes at low-rises and store windows, reading the plaques on government buildings and the flashy signs of snack bars. For some reason, everything around him seemed extraordinary, magical, astounding. He suddenly felt very young, as if he had never left Moscow. Something was different here for sure. And yet it was the same old city.

Why hadn’t he done this before? After all, he had been regularly coming to Moscow. Why had he never been able to walk these small streets that held so much fascination for him for such a long time?

But of course Roland knew the reason full well. Each of his visits had been planned out to the last minute: the arrival, the trip to the hotel, work, dinner, work, sleep, work, the trip to the airport, and the departure. And now, as he was walking through familiar places, Ogier suddenly felt incredibly free and more alive than ever. He couldn’t remember feeling anything like it for a long time.

The sky was as clear as can be, warm rays were playing on the bright surface of the puddles, and the soft breeze was cool and fresh.

Roland got on a streetcar, bought a ticket, and punched it with an odd sense of delight. He then walked the length of the car and stood on the rear platform. The doors closed and the streetcar started down the boulevard.

Smiling with delight, Ogier looked at the gleaming tracks rolling out from under the car, at modest old houses and sprawling trees forming the vista on both sides. He suddenly remembered how Sergey asked him about nostalgia, and immediately Roland realized that he had really missed this city. But was it nostalgia? After all, he didn’t miss the country, with its barbaric laws, or the people, intimidated, enslaved, and cynical. But he missed these streets, these houses, these streetcars. He noticed a small pond beside the tracks. Ogier involuntarily smiled at the memory of how, slightly buzzed, he had once dipped in this pond on a dare. This had happened in the autumn, and the water was ice-cold. He remembered every small detail of that stunt.

Every turn brought back new memories. Over there, behind the arch, was the world's best bakery. Judging by the sign, it was still there. Roland wondered if they still made those delicious raisin scones.

And this was the theater that he used to frequent with Ludmila—his first wife and Sergey's mother. They were not yet married at that time. She was wearing a dark blue dress with a neckline that back then looked quite provocative.

A bookstore, a cozy cafe now converted into a pizzeria, a distant bell-tower—Yes, he remembered everything. And those memories were bright and pleasant.

Roland's heart suddenly filled with wonderful joy—almost for no obvious reason, not counting the pleasure from the ride. And along with this joy came faith and a certainty that a new, wonderful life was really beginning for him. Yes, he now had a son and a family. He now had someone to care for. Just to think that he had nearly forgotten what it was like—to feel needed! But now everything would change. From now on, everything would be different.

Roland gave a critical eye to Alina, who had emerged from the taxi together with Veronica and Sergey. Before him was a slender blonde—Ogier wasn't sure if she was natural or bleached. What surprised him was the expression on her fairly attractive face, a proud and even somewhat arrogant look. At first he thought that it was just his imagination, but then she smiled, and the smile came out—he wouldn't call it indifferent—but somehow condescending. Yet oddly enough, this woman's coldness did not only repulse but also seemed to appeal to Ogier. Besides, she looked dazzling in the dress he had picked for her.

They were seated in a nice place. The dining area of the restaurant at the House of Journalists was almost filled to capacity, but the table Roland had reserved had been kept vacant for them. Having noticed a few familiar faces, Ogier nodded with a smile in response to their greetings and at once busied himself with the wine list.

“Hey, Roland! How long have you been in Moscow?” A man with a squat build and probing, beady eyes stopped by their table. “What are you up to this time? I thought we now had a complete calm on the sports horizon. Did I miss anything?” he asked with open curiosity.

“No, of course not. I'm here on personal business,” Roland hastened to clarify. “By the way, allow me to introduce you. Meet Sergey, my son.” He patiently waited for Sergey to stand up and shake hands with the chunky guy, and then gave the latter a conspiratorial smile. “But I'll stop by, anyway—to trade some gossip.”

Meanwhile, Veronica was frantically gesticulating as she discussed the menu with her friend. Alina

was more reserved and only occasionally nodded or shook her head. Looking at his daughter-in-law, Ogier couldn't hold back a smile. It occurred to him that the order was shaping up to be a challenge.

"A lot of people here know you," noted Sergey as his father exchanged silent greetings with other guests. "I'm surprised—"

"Don't be surprised. It's is a small world. Let alone the world of journalists. And the sports world is the smallest of them all."

A sommelier came up to their table with a bottle of wine and poured some into Ogier's glass. Roland tasted the drink, nodded, and motioned to pour the wine into everyone's glasses.

"But for some reason, tonight there are more of those here who deal in politics," he added.

"Elections. We'll soon have election," shrugged Sergey. "And that's up my street. I know a few people here, even though I'm not on speaking terms with any of them."

"There you go." Ogier brightened up. "Can you see it now? I don't just come for fun here but also to do work. Sure, I work here, too. That said, we certainly haven't gathered here for work's sake." He raised his voice to draw Veronica and Alina's attention. They were censoriously eyeing other guests. Well, here's to our meeting!"

They raised their glasses and drank. The wine was superb. Roland smiled and took a few sips.

After placing their order, they refilled their glasses. And from a certain perspective, Alina's smile started looking to Roland quite congenial, intriguing, and even noble—yes, that was the word that came to his mind. It might be that alcohol had affected Alina or even himself—Ogier didn't think about it then. He just enjoyed the delicious food, savored the wine, and from time to time smiled back at Alina. And he kept refilling the glasses.

Chapter 5

Roland was wakened by a strange noise. It seemed as if someone was drilling a concrete wall close by. For about a minute he stared blankly at the crumbling paint on the ceiling of the room before he finally realized that the source of the noise was in his own head. The revelation made him sick to his stomach.

Nonetheless, he composed himself and started slowly, one by one, to recall the events of last night. He remembered them sitting down at the table and the wine being brought to them. He also remembered the dinner, the conversations and jokes. Yeah, everyone got quite buzzed, perhaps with the exception of Veronica—

At this point, it suddenly struck Roland that the dilapidated ceiling that he was aimlessly staring at couldn't be the ceiling of his hotel room. As if stung by this thought, Ogier jumped up for an instant but felt dizzy and dropped back on the pillow. In the fall, however, he managed to take in the poverty of the room interior.

He must piece it all together. It was just a matter of remembering everything. He could do this—

Roland's thoughts went back to the events of the previous night. Well, Sergei and Alina's intoxication was no surprise: unfamiliar surroundings, mysterious food and wine. But what about him, Ogier? Well, at least he seemed to have been able to leave in time and save face.

All he had to do was get to his hotel room. And that would've been so easy! But no, he had to insist on "taking the lady home." Without him, she wouldn't have made it!

Ogier despondently traced water stains on the ceiling and frowned more and more. He had now fully regained his memory, which made him feel even more miserable. And then it occurred to him that perhaps Alina was somewhere nearby.

Trying to make no sudden movements, Roland rose on one elbow and scanned the room. The ambiance was so oppressive that Ogier could barely suppress a new bout of nausea. Alina was not in the room, and the whole apartment was so quiet that, through the hangover din in his ears, he was able to discern a distinct ticking sound—it seemed to come from a large wall clock in the kitchen.

Ogier sat up on the couch and put his feet on the floor. It suddenly occurred to him that a hangover felt a thousand times worse in Russia than in any other country. At another time this surmise would have seemed funny to him, but right now Ogier was not amused.

He got up and, wearing just his shorts, toured the apartment. It turned out to be a one-bedroom. Roland guessed that the windows were probably overlooking some dump, but he was in no mood to confirm that impression.

In the kitchen, he sized up a pile of dirty dishes in the sink, then rummaged in the cupboard for a clean mug, but to no avail. Having decided that his position allowed him to put aside propriety, he took a few big gulps of warm water right from the kettle standing on the stove. Roland instantly felt better and wanted to drink some more when a sideways look at the kitchen floor made him freeze with a short groan.

Right, this is where it all happened. And the saucer with cigarette butts, which Alina put next to her, was still on the table. Beastly cigarettes, by the way—putrid and very strong. Roland winced as he recalled the details.

Alina had taken little part in the action, giving him complete freedom. That wasn't his style. What freedom? It was like humping a rubber doll. Not that he had ever tried it with a doll. But Alina was prepared to stay on her back as long as he pleased, with a pack of cigarettes, lighter, and saucer, which she used as an ashtray, next to her.

There also seemed to be a boy. About twelve or thirteen years old, with thick, horn-rimmed glasses. When Ogier and Alina burst into the apartment, the boy had heard the noise and looked out into the hallway. He scrutinized Roland for a while until his mother spotted him and sent him to bed.

So where were they now? Well, Alina was most likely at work. And the boy? Ogier cringed at the thought that this child could be hiding somewhere nearby, watching him with curiosity. He cast a glum look at the door, but then consoled himself that, like all good boys of his age, Alina's son was probably sitting in class at that very moment.

Yeah, some adventure! But perhaps this still beat hooking up with a prostitute. Anyway, Roland was fully satisfied, and this was no minor thing to him, seeing that he hadn't had a steady girlfriend for almost a year. He had never liked prostitutes and was scraping by on random connections. As a time-saving strategy, he typically combined pleasure with business.

Roland glanced at the empty dining table. With a sad smile, he realized that he would be pleased to find on it a breakfast or at least a note, or both. But perhaps that would be too lavish. After all, he had already got his reward.

With a heavy sigh, he went up to the window and looked out. His misgivings were confirmed: in the middle of the gray courtyard were several overflowing dumpsters. This sight suddenly made him so sick, so sad that he had to close his eyes.

Ogier felt as if his long-suffering head would crack open any minute. He wondered how Sergei was feeling. Maybe he should call his son—

Roland's whole body was suddenly gripped by a convulsion. He grabbed the windowsill just in time to control a new bout of dizziness. "Call him?" Jesus Christ! How could he forget! Ogier cast a glance

at the clock on the wall. He still had enough time to get there, but not a minute was left for preparation. He cursed and hurriedly started pulling on his clothes.

It had happened at night when all of them were already asleep. Roland's cell phone went off—the call woke him up. Incidentally, he wasn't the only one who woke up. Alina didn't hold back her displeasure, which she expressed with an angry curse. Ogier had to lock himself in the bathroom. At that moment he had poorly understood what was happening, but he felt in his gut that the call was important. To think of it, Gregory Maynard never called him about trifles.

Gregory, the unpredictable Gregory! Roland's chum, he often visited him in France and had also recently befriended Maurice, who joined them on their tours of Parisian bars. And, of course, when Roland and Maurice happened to be in New York, Maynard willingly took on the role of "guide."

However, Maynard had a peculiar way of being a friend: from time to time, after a long absence, he would unexpectedly come to his friends with some request or assignment. Of course Gregory paid, and paid generously. But at times Roland wished they could just sit down as they used to and have a bottle of good wine, and that Gregory wouldn't segue into some "hot job" or "interesting proposition."

Oh, that Gregory—superbly successful, glamorous, devilish Gregory. Albeit not an Italian Mafioso, he was unsurpassed at making people offers they couldn't refuse. And Ogier never refused; nor was he going to this time. Especially considering that he had spent a pretty penny last night, splurging in the goddamn restaurant, and Gregory promised a double rate.

Gregory the tempter. Roland's foot caught in his pant leg. He nearly fell to the floor and swore out loud.

It was as if Maynard knew or sensed by some mysterious instinct that Roland would be in the mood to splurge to the hilt. Be that as it may, Ogier had never squandered money as recklessly as he did last night. And what for? Maybe he just wanted to make a splash. Indeed, in this monochrome world, a world of extreme poverty, it was so easy to seem as rich as Croesus, in possession of magical powers.

And he'd had a most appreciative audience, although it consisted of just one spectator—his daughter-in-law. The other two were just annoyed with his manners. Sergey had grimaced and rolled his eyes, and Alina, well—

Ogier found that the thought of this woman gave him chills. Not that he hadn't found yesterday's sex with her unpleasant, but—he was scared of her coldness. Her indifference. Her stupid stubbornness.

How had she put it to him yesterday? "You wouldn't understand, but I'll go to any lengths to give my son a chance to live in a normal country and to realize his potential." Yeah, "go to any lengths"—"any lengths" seemed to refer to the dirty kitchen floor. On the other hand, what else could she offer?

But forget about Alina. He, too, had given her a handsome reward. At least, the Armani dress looked fabulous on her. Besides, everything was perfect yesterday, and, best of all, it was over in time.

A critical glance in the mirror brought a sour smile to Roland's lips. His eyes were puffy, and a shave wouldn't hurt either. Yet, strangely enough, the physical satisfaction lit up his face with calm and confidence.

He closed the apartment door behind him, descended the stairs, and went out into the street. He felt a puff of warm breeze on his face, sweeping away every trace of his hangover. Ogier managed to completely regain his composure by reminding himself that the spotlight wouldn't be on him but on this politician. What was his name again?

Roy Corell stood leaning on the hood of a minivan and smoked while leisurely talking with the driver. On seeing Roland from a distance, he waved affably.

"Oh my God, Roland Ogier in the flesh!" exclaimed Roy with a dazzling smile, taking a few steps forward. "Good to see you, old man!"

"Likewise," smiled Ogier.

They shook hands cordially.

"Everybody is here already," added Roy, stamping out his cigarette. "Get in. Let's go."

Roland whistled in surprise when he saw lighting technicians and Roy's camera assistant in the van.

"Wow! You've got a whole crew here!—is this thing going live?"

"No idea," shrugged Roy with a grin. "But I would be damned to turn down a star like Gregory. No way! He asked to make it all 'top-notch', too. He caught me completely off guard: I had to spend half the night on the phone looking for the guys. We're here for a different reason altogether. But what brings you here? If I remember right, you've never done politics."

"Well, do you know anyone who could turn down Maynard?" Ogier shrugged. "That said, I'm not too sure that I can handle his assignment. By the way, did you manage to get what I asked for?"

They merged into the noisy highway and sped with the traffic into the city center.

"H.G. Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*. This wasn't easy, you know, looking in the shadows and at night," chuckled Roy as he pulled a folder with printouts from his bag. "It's the Russian version. I hope you haven't forgotten your mother tongue yet."

Roland took the printouts and started leafing through them. The lighting technicians were silently peering through the windows. The camera assistant amused himself with a portable digital video camera, filming everything around him.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” exclaimed Roy. “This is the questionnaire I got by email this morning. You might want to look it over before we get there. But enough teaching the dog how to bark. The main thing is the money, and it’ll soon be in the account. This bloody Russia—it only seems at first glance that everything is cheap here, while in fact it’s like a black hole! Everything is cheap, so you end up buying non-stop. You’ve got the same deal going on, I guess? By the way, I can’t remember when and where you and I last worked together?”

“In Somalia. Don’t ask when: we got into the thick of it.”

“That’s what I mean. How did you even end up there? I don’t think they know anything of sports in those parts. Maynard again?”

“Yeah. I was in Morocco at that time.”

“That’s what I mean,” snickered Roy. “Seems like no distance, just a few steps away on the map. And he wrote an excellent book afterwards.”

“I’m okay with that.” Ogier waved his hand dismissively. “Maynard is Maynard. We journalists are all like that—people without scruples. By the way, who is this Kukshin that we’re seeing? Do you mind enlightening me in a few words?”

Roy shrugged and crinkled up his face.

“I don’t really know. Some minor leader—new crop. He emerged quite unexpectedly. But you know this fox Gregory—he’s got a nose for such things. He knows exactly what he’s doing. So this Kukshin must be worth our time.”

Roland nodded and, after a quick glance through the window, he focused on Gregory’s message. He didn’t find much to decipher in it. Despite his eccentricities, Maynard was pedantic, so he elaborated everything in a lot of detail. But he knew Roland well, so at the end of the letter there was a postscript: “This is a mandatory part of the program. Outside it, feel free to play by ear. Just don’t overdo it.”

Fortunately, the traffic jam on the Garden Ring couldn’t be avoided, so Roland got a chance to brush up on reading the work by the venerable British science fiction writer—that same collection of essays which had recently been often invoked in connection with the events in Russia. Ogier was particularly struck by the similarity of the events Wells described almost a century ago to what was now happening in his former—that is, “historical”—homeland.

Kukshin turned out to be a lean, lanky man with a neat haircut, clean-shaven and stylishly dressed. His formal suit, combined with crisp, precise gestures, demonstrated an image-maker’s impeccable work.

However, he was pale, and despite his best efforts, he was unable to hide a bit of nervousness. The

latter was perhaps well justified. As far as Roland knew, this interview was one of his first appearances in the Western media.

The TV crew set up the cameras, adjusted the light, and checked the sound. Roland settled into a leather chair, half-turned to Kukshin and looked quizzically at Roy, who was bending over his camera. Corell smiled, nodded, and they started.

Ogier began with the general questions from Gregory's list. While Kukshin was patiently and at length explaining the meaning and purpose of the movement he had spearheaded, Roland got a chance to get a better look at him. *What makes this little man, who seems absolutely common at first glance, so interesting to Maynard? And where did this Kukshin spring from, anyway?*

Actually, his background was no mystery: he had emerged from the bowels of some research institute, seemingly by chance. The printout of a web page, which Gregory had diligently attached to the questionnaire, contained a saga of Kukshin's eviction from his apartment, which eventually precipitated the founding of Arrow. All of this had happened naturally and, at the same time, unexpectedly, so no one knew what to think of this new phenomenon.

Roland, too, had trouble understanding what this "king of the wretched" was after, now that he was sitting in front of Kukshin and looking at him with curiosity. Was he really trying to stir up another revolution—this time aimed against bureaucracy and crime? All of this smacked of a fairy tale.

In the meantime, Kukshin began to show annoyance about the range of questions asked of him, longing to elaborate his position in full detail. In Roland's understanding, this was not part of Maynard's plan. To keep the upper hand, he hastened to head off Kukshin's possible attack.

"One more question, Mr. Kukshin, perhaps the last one." Ogier paused for effect. "In his day, the English writer H.G. Wells published a work called *Russia in the Shadows*, and, as time shows, it was in many ways prophetic. Do you find any similarities between the situation described by Wells and current events? Perhaps this brilliant visionary's work could also be a source of useful insights for you, as well as a source of advice that you could follow in your activities?"

Well, the question clearly hit Kukshin below the belt. Yet even though the latter didn't get a chance to elaborate his position, at least he could land on his feet.

"As far as I remember," he said after a pause, "in these essays Wells strongly recommends the recognition of the Bolshevik government as the only effective and legitimate authority in the country, urging all Western states—above all the U.S.—not to defy this government but to assist it and cooperate with it. Wells saw this strategy as the only way for the coexistence of the two systems." Kukshin shook his head and chuckled. "It is worth noting of course that he was a science fiction writer. There may be no alternative to this strategy, but no one accepted it back then or accepts it nowadays."

Ogier nodded and asked a question that he had long been holding back, reserving it for last.

“So do you think that if some ‘iron fist’ leader were now suddenly to emerge in Russia, this would pit both the country and the leader against the rest of the world? This is a very important question. Please correct me if I misunderstood you. Generally speaking, where do you stand on tough methods of governing?”

Kukshin accepted the challenge. Or perhaps he consciously allowed Roland to lure himself into a trap.

“One German named Wilhelm Schwöbel, I think, once said that rules hold in society as long as there are no big winners or big losers.”

Roland seemed to have been waiting for this cue.

“That’s interesting! And what’s next?” Ogier even allowed himself to raise his voice. “A game without rules?”

But Kukshin was unperturbed. As if prophesying, with an almost imperceptible smile touching the corners of his mouth, he waited a few beats and then said slowly and clearly, “No. Next—the rules change.”

Roland always watched the work of TV crews with admiration. It seemed that they had just been smoking, sipping coffee, chatting, laughing, and poking fun at each other. And then suddenly everything merged into a single cohesive organism working at top capacity and efficiency—not a single redundant movement or word. And then, next thing he knew, they were once again trading salty jokes while disassembling the equipment.

Meanwhile, Kukshin politely shook Roland’s hand and proceeded in the company of his bodyguards and assistant into another room, thus signalling that the interview was over. Ogier mechanically fixed his eyes on the door that had closed behind them. The interview had left him with a strange feeling of incompleteness.

“Are you coming?” With his camera on his shoulder, Roy was already standing by the exit.

Roland nodded and followed him.

“Well, as it turns out, the guy is also quick on the draw,” chuckled Roy.

“Yeah,” said Ogier, “only there’s something about him that worried me, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

They got out of the elevator and headed down the hall to the door that led into the street.

“I think I know what you mean.” Roy looked mysteriously at Ogier. “I also felt it at some point.”

“Felt what?”

“It’s hard to explain. Well, a couple of times it seemed to me that he wanted to say something else, something important—but that was not part of your plan, as I understand.”

“Maynard’s plan, that is,” shrugged Ogier.

They went out into the street. The rest of the group was already sitting in the minivan.

Roland decided to change the subject.

“That reminds me. Gregory should have transferred the money by now,” he exclaimed but never got to finish the thought.

Following a strange sound and a short click, a piece of marble came off a column and fell to the ground a few inches from Roland. Yet instead of running for cover, he just stared at the small bullet hole, as if unable to take his eyes off it.

(End of the sample)