THE TROIKA DOLLS

Miranda Darling began her career as a fashion model in Paris and London, then went on to read English and Modern Languages at Oxford University. She travelled widely to countries such as Russia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Namibia and Indonesia before returning to Australia to complete a Masters in Strategic Studies and Defence. She analysed new security threats for a think tank, where she published widely in newspapers and journals. She retains an interest in international intrigue and now writes full time.
THE TROIKA DOLLS

MIRANDA DARLING

ALLEN&UNWIN
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For Nicholas
## Contents

**Prologue**
1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17

**Epilogue**

**Acknowledgements**
Prologue

The Walensee had frozen over and the ice was thick enough for skating. Ernesto sat on one of the benches on the edge of the lake and tied the laces on his skates. The winter had been cold, he thought, the coldest anyone could remember.

His wife Gegia sat next to him, her skates already laced. She had thought about packing a picnic for their excursion, but everywhere on the ice small stalls were springing up selling bratwurst and chestnuts and Glühwein and she was glad she had not gone to the trouble.

Her two sons were already chasing each other up and down, skating around the clumps of reeds that poked through the ice near the shore.

A raven stood on the ice and watched them, its malevolent beak sharp against the white backdrop. Lucio threw a snowball, missing the bird but sending him fluttering into the pale winter sky with a wing beat. His caw made Gegia shiver.

The four of them skated off towards the centre of the lake, the blades of their skates clacking on the tiny frozen ripples.

Rosanna and Roger joined them with their two daughters and the families planned on making a day of it. Already the ice market was filling with people rugged up in furs and scarves and great overcoats, their mouths puffing ‘grüezi mitenand’ in greeting as they passed.

The Alps formed a ring around the lake, the black granite and dark pines all snow-capped. In spring, rivers of melted snow ran down the crevasses and emptied into the lake. Some of the rivers ran so fast they flowed right through winter, deep under the ice. Even in summer, the water was freezing cold, a polished slate mirror that reflected the warmer summer sky.

Gegia and Ernesto watched the boys skate off, away from the stalls and the crowds, towards the far shore, Rosanna’s two smaller girls skating furiously to keep up with the boys.

A band set up and began to play. The cheerful trio soon had everyone skating to the tempo of traditional Swiss mountain songs.

Everything was as it should be.

In the distance, the four children had stopped skating. They were about a hundred metres away from the crowds but their parents could still see them clearly. They had begun a game of sorts, skating together in a circle, holding hands, singing a song. Gegia couldn’t quite catch the words . . .

She suddenly grew uneasy, seeing them cut such small figures against the vast white expanse. She wanted them nearer to her. She took Ernesto by the arm and the two of them headed for the children. As they grew closer they could make out the words of the song the children had invented.

Blüemli under ‘m Is, blossoms under the ice
Ganz schön g’froore, very nicely frozen,
Rosa oder Gääl, pink or yellow
Ich weis nöd, I can’t tell
Weles schöner isch, which the nicest is.

Gegia smiled at the happy little voices.

As the parents drew nearer, they saw the children had found two brightly coloured patches of ice, one bright pink, the other canary yellow. They were circling them, singing their ice blossom song.

The patches did indeed look like fruit flowers, trapped in ice. The effect was quite beautiful. Perhaps some coloured streamers had been washed down from the mountains in the spring thaw . . .

Gegia skated closer, still smiling. She looked down, laughing now, as the blade on her skate cut across the ice. There was a paler shape in the ice, just there, on one edge of the pink blossom. Gegia bent down then gasped in horror.

She was looking at a human hand, trapped under the ice. It was the hand of a young girl.
The wheels slapped the tarmac and skidded. There was ice on the runway and the nose of the plane danced as the pilot fought for control.

Stevie fixed her eyes on the terminal building: Welcome to Heathrow.

Her fingers on the armrest were relaxed—she wasn’t afraid of flying—but a bitter knot of tension was swelling in her stomach. It had been there since yesterday.

Outside, the orange overalls of the ground staff glowed in the dead grey light. The wings of the plane had been de-iced for take-off in Zurich, and the weather was no warmer in London. A blanket of cold had settled over all of Europe. Even the old people could not remember a colder winter.

Icy sea mists swathed England and Scotland, Ireland and Wales; sheets of sleet drummed incessantly on the Low Countries; the Alps were smothered in snow. In Russia, ice fell from the sky, and in Central Asia, the sky itself had frozen. It had been this way for months and it seemed like it would go on forever.

A driver was waiting inside the terminal.

‘Miss Stevie Duveen?’ At her nod, he led her to the waiting limousine.

Stevie collapsed into the warm leather interior and watched as London passed in damp brushstrokes of grey and charcoal outside the window.

The limousine pulled up in front of a grey stone building just off The Mall, indistinguishable from the other grey stone buildings that lined the central London street. Stevie hurried up the steps towards the heavy, black-lacquered door. There was no sign or bell or flag to give any indication that this was Hazard HQ, only two potted cumquat trees standing clipped and to attention on either side of the entrance.

The door buzzed open of its own accord. Stevie crossed the black-and-white chequered marble floor of the lobby. It was empty save a heavy wooden desk and one uncomfortable-looking antique chair.

The receptionist greeted her. ‘He’s waiting for you, Miss Duveen.’

‘Carmel, please, call me Stevie,’ she begged.

‘I’m required to be formal, Miss Duveen,’ Carmel indicated with a discreet hand.

Stevie smiled at her and headed up the staircase that hugged the left-hand wall. On the first floor, a clear perspex globe was mounted on the wall. Stevie allowed it to scan her iris, then a heavy wooden door opened with a soft click.

Inside, the hive was busy: desks with computers, stacks of paper, periodicals in every language sat under huge wall maps of the world, stuck all over with different-coloured pins.

This was Strategic Analysis, each desk supervising a different region of the world. Analysts trawled for information on organised crime, terrorist activities—anything—in their part of the world. These local situation reports created a strategic picture of the shadow world: gangs, paramilitary groups, political parties, notorious faces; an in-house scale measured levels of corruption faced by businesses in each country.

This analysis was gold to Hazard’s clients—multinational corporations, foreign investors, prominent officials or personalities. If, say, an American canning company was thinking of opening a factory in Mindanao, they might want to know if the last five foreign-owned canning factories in the region had been torched to the ground, their foremen beheaded, for refusing to pay ‘taxes’ to rebel leaders. This information might help them quantify the risk, decide whether it was acceptable, and move to minimise the danger of it happening to them.

The hive buzzed twenty-four hours a day.

Into the melee strode the formidable Josephine—she preferred Josie—Wang, head of Confidential Investigations.

‘Welcome back, Stevie. It seems the Papillon affair has come to a successful close.’

Then David Rice entered the room, eclipsing everyone. He was all powerful chest and jaw, his thick grey hair suggesting invincibility despite his limp and the cane he carried in his left hand.

Stevie felt a jolt of pleasure and apprehension. Rice had been a commander in the Special Forces, then turned to training others when a leg injury ruled him out of active duty. He had done a spell in intelligence before moving on to advising government on their defence policy and home security. He had founded Hazard Limited shortly after. He was also the man Stevie respected most in the world.

‘Stevie Duveen.’ He announced her in his beautiful, booming voice. Only now did Stevie notice the stranger at his
‘Stevie, this is Alan Green. He’s just joined the Hazard board. He’s head of the UK arm of Papillon. Alan, this is Stevie Duveen.’

Stevie saw the surprise in Alan Green’s eyes. He had probably been expecting something very different to the pale and delicate creature in front of him.

Stevie was small—not terribly short, but built like a songbird, all bones and ribcage and long throat. Her hair was cropped to her jaw *a la garçonne*, her features bright and sharp.

‘Surprised, Mr Green?’ Rice had noticed the look too. Hazard’s clients responded differently to Stevie than to the firm’s ex-military consultants. This didn’t always work to her advantage, but sometimes Stevie was able to get through where others weren’t.

‘Stevie’s job isn’t at the sharp end of things, although she’s stronger than she looks,’ Rice informed him. ‘She is skilled in body combat, and can fence and shoot—’

‘In fairness,’ Stevie broke in, ‘they’re skills I’ve learned for self-preservation, rather than for the preservation of others.’

Rice chuckled. ‘Her role is as lightning conductor for clients. Prevention of a security incident is always the goal. If the worst happens, we guarantee a trained negotiator on the ground within twenty-four hours.’

Rice beckoned to Stevie to follow them. The next room was sparsely furnished, a long bench with telephones, more wall maps, a big whiteboard. Several people were moving about; no one was sitting down.

‘This is Crisis Response. Most of the people in here are kidnap and extortion specialists. It can get pretty hot in here.’

Rice pointed to the whiteboard. A list of names ran down the left side. ‘These are the names of people who are currently being held, the time and date of the kidnapping, location, suspected perpetrators and so forth.’

Alan Green examined the board. The locations ranged from Chechnya and the Philippines, to Colombia, Russia and Iraq.

‘That second chap, he’s been held for three years by the date on the board—is that common?’ he asked.

‘Unfortunately, in some parts of the world it is, Colombia for instance,’ Rice replied. ‘You will be familiar with Ingrid Betancourt. She was held for six years before being rescued. Others are not so lucky. It is most often a matter of money. Occasionally it is political and there is very little Hazard can do.’

‘Avoid being kidnapped in the first place, I suppose!’ Alan Green’s eyes were wide.

‘And that’s where Stevie comes in: we had her in strategic analysis at Hazard for some years—Russia, Central Asia, Indonesia and North Africa. Only it turns out she’s rather good at spotting risks before they materialise—we call it her Early Bird Alert—so now she’s assigned to specific clients rather than regions.’

Stevie was feeling a little uncomfortable, being talked about as if she were not there. She concentrated on a small ball of teal blue fluff that had formed on the edge of the carpet.

‘Stevie advises clients interested in preventing security incidents. She’s been on most of Hazard’s training programmes—hostile environment training, close protection, defensive driver training, crisis management and so on —so she has a good understanding of what she is recommending for her clients.’

Alan Green was unable to hide his scepticism as he looked Stevie over. ‘Surely it’s very risky to intervene in these situations . . .’

‘I don’t intervene, Mr Green,’ she said evenly. ‘In, say, a kidnapping I’d stay on hand to provide an ongoing assessment of the situation for Hazard, the client and the negotiator—anything that might help them in communications with the kidnappers, and the media.’

‘We have more active departments for any rough stuff—mostly ex-paramilitaries,’ added Rice. He hand-picked those teams and he was very proud of them.

‘Well, Papillon were very impressed with how you handled our problem. Discretion was vital.’

Stevie flushed a little but managed to look Alan Green in the eye and say ‘Thank you’ in a firm voice.

The Papillon affair had been an extortion case involving Papillon chocolates, the largest confectionary manufacturer in Europe. An anonymous person had threatened to poison a batch of their popular hazelnut praline bon—bons unless a ransom was paid. A sample of the poisoned chocolate was included with the ransom demand, to prove means and intent.
Stevie had flown to Papillon headquarters in Amsterdam and had the chocolate analysed. The unusual choice of poison had led her to a disgruntled food chemist employed by the company. The matter was then resolved internally to the satisfaction of all but the food chemist.

‘Sir!’ A shout from young Boyd, manning the phones. ‘It’s Mexico City—Portland Trucks, sounds like a fast-food job.’

Rice was at Boyd’s side in a flash. Alan Green turned to Stevie. ‘Fast-food job?’

‘It’s when they snatch someone off the street, drive to an ATM and force them to withdraw the contents of their bank account,’ Stevie explained. ‘It’s petty criminals mostly, but lots of people have been killed this way.’

Rice was in fast conversation with Harold Betterman, head of the department. ‘Get Della Mare on the phone, and Fillippo Berez.’ Rice was all business, his face hard. Stevie loved watching him work: he was invincible under pressure.

She glanced at one of the clocks on the wall: London time. The Hammer-Belles were expecting her at the Ritz and she never kept a client waiting.

The lobby of the Ritz was warm and comfortable and Stevie didn’t mind waiting. Perhaps her shoes would dry in time.

Her muscles were aching. She had been at the Swords Club, her fencing salle, the night before. Four bouts with Patrick Molyneux had left her with a Dalmatian’s coat of bruises along her right thigh. He’d even been rude enough to try a flick hit, whipping his foil upward then cracking it down over Stevie’s shoulder like a stockwhip to sting her on the scapula. An ungentlemanly strike that stung like a wasp. But Molyneux had lost his cool and never regained it; Stevie had won three out of four bouts. He had left the club frustrated and perspiring—a most satisfactory result.


His coming show was attracting so much attention. She hoped he was still in Barbados . . . She couldn’t think about Joss now. She wished she were home in Zurich.

Stevie rummaged around in an enormous battered black alligator bag. Somewhere inside were her cigarettes and Josie’s detailed description of her clients’ background.

Stevie had never been a smoker, but as cigarette bans crept across the Continent she knew that soon tobacco would no longer be possible in public places. So she had taken up smoking—long black cigarettes from Russia, with gold filter-tips. She intended to participate fully in the end of an era.

Douglas Hammer and Sandy Belle were megawatt Hollywood celebrities. They were so famous that Douglas’ trainer had his own television show, so famous that the couple spent most of their time when they weren’t on set secluded in a massive compound in an undisclosed location (Arizona). They were über film stars, undeniably famous and competitively so.

Stevie, reader of gossip magazines for work and sometimes pleasure, knew all this already. Part of protecting a high value target—or HVT—involves researching just how much information about their private life was in the public domain. It was astonishing how much you could learn about people, especially public figures, for free from the internet.

There was little about Douglas and Sandy’s life that was not documented, celebrated, criticised and publicised. They were not, as her indomitable grandmother Didi would have put it, shirking violets.

A blow-wave of hairdressers burst through the Ritz revolving doors. Stevie counted five from her position in a gilded armchair facing the door. Their deep tans, stiff highlights and large black cases marked them easily. The leader of the wave drifted to the front desk and announced his intention to ascend to the suite of Douglas Hammer and Sandy Belle. Loud enough, oh yes, so that most of the lobby could hear.

Good luck, thought a bored Stevie, stretching her drying toes. She’d been here twenty minutes just waiting for permission to access their floor.

The posse moved without delay towards the lift and disappeared to the upper floors.

In astonishment, Stevie stubbed her half-smoked cigarette, gathered up her bag and approached the front desk.

‘Excuse me. Are you certain Mr Hammer and Miss Belle know I am waiting to see them?’ she asked, keeping her voice mild.

Another call was put through. Then, ‘Madam, yes they do. They are ready to receive you now. The Berkley Suite
is on the seventh floor. The lift is on your—'

‘Right. Yes. Thank you.’

Under the rather unforgiving, she thought, lift lights, Stevie smoothed her hair and checked her face for smudges of mascara. Presentable.

Did Douglas Hammer and Sandy Belle have reason to fear for the safety of their five-month-old son, Kennedy-Jack? They were moving to London and had requested the services of Hazard. Stevie would probably recommend the kidnap package which included surveillance-awareness training for the parents, discreet bodyguards that went wherever the baby did, some defensive driving techniques, and detailed home security. The services of a negotiator would also be possible as an extra, should the worst happen.

Stevie had found that training made the HVTs feel safer and more prepared. Training would calm the fears of the parents in this case and make them more aware of what situations posed an elevated risk, and at what times they would be relatively safe. Existing in constant fear, and not feeling like there was anything you could do about it, was not living. The latest research Stevie had read found that this situation, when replicated in laboratory rats, produced severe neurosis.

The door to the suite was answered by a woman dressed in a black lycra dance-top and soft shoes, all gentle curves and bumps. She was midway through a conversation via headset that continued at full volume as she waved Stevie into the room.

It smelt of expensive scent and cleaning products and food and body odour all at once.

Stevie’s first view of the celebrated Sandy Belle in the flesh was utterly confusing. The star was lashed into a motorised contraption that consisted of rubber strapping tightly buckled to her limbs and torso, which vibrated at high speed then shifted, as if into different gear, to an even higher speed. Sandy Belle, to make matters worse, was groaning. Stevie was horrified but no one seemed to be taking any notice.

She looked around for Douglas Hammer, caring husband and dashing dresser, tabloid darling, feeder of orphaned masses, five-time Oscar nominee and inveterate collector of fine cars. He was sitting in front of a large mirror surrounded by the hairdressers, ants on a biscuit crumb. A man was filming him with a tiny digital camera.

Hammer was very handsome, in his early forties, tanned and slimline, dark brown eyes and hair. He was also naked to the waist. All eyes were on Douglas’ reflection, none appeared to even hear the cries of the agonised Sandy Belle. Nor did they appear to notice Stevie.

The torture machine picked up even more speed, Sandy groaned louder, her body rolled and tossed like a cloth doll, her copper-coloured ponytail whipping the air in a fury.

Stevie stopped one of Sandy’s black-clad assistants. There were five that she could count.

‘Is Miss Belle alright? She doesn’t sound very well.’ Stevie approached the machine, intent on some kind of intervention.

‘What are you doing?’ cried one.

‘Don’t touch the gyroniser! It cost a quarter of a million pounds!’ pitched in another.

‘Sandy Belle has three of them,’ cried yet another. Stevie looked for the one who had spoken last.

What?

Finally Sandy Belle came to a stop, shiny-red in the face, but recovered enough to speak for herself, or rather, to allow others to speak for her.

‘This is Stevie Duveen, Sandy, from Risk Dangers.’

‘Sandy’s exercising. This is not really a great time.’

‘The gyroniser is the latest in cellulite treatment, originally developed by NASA scientists to prevent muscle wastage in astronauts. Fascinating.’

Stevie was surrounded. She fought panic like a gulp of bile in the back of her throat. There seemed to be an endless number of small round people dressed in black: headsets, tiny hands and feet, scurrying.

Like beetles, she thought. She drew a breath and looked Sandy Belle right in the eye.

‘Hello, Miss Belle. I am Stevie Duveen, the risk assessor for Hazard Limited. I am here to talk to you about your concerns for the safety of your family. Is there somewhere we can talk more privately?’

One of the beetles began to protest but Sandy Belle silenced her with a wave of her hand.

‘It’s okay, Melanie.’ She turned to Stevie and smiled. ‘Call me Sandy. All my friends do.’
Another beetle scurried in. ‘Sandy, Kelli from Chloe is bringing you bags and shoes in half an hour. Your stylists are going to pick out something you love for the premier.’

Sandy’s eyes left Stevie’s and began to dart around.

‘Sandy,’ said Stevie sharply, re-focusing her attention, ignoring the beetles completely. ‘Is there somewhere we can talk more privately?’

A few minutes later, perched on the apricot silk bedspread with the door firmly closed, Sandy Belle, wrapped in a robe, her eyes lowered, began to tell Stevie of her fears.

‘I’m terrified that Kennedy-Jack is going to be kidnapped. The thought keeps me from sleeping at night.’

‘It’s a terrifying thought for any mother,’ Stevie reassured her sympathetically. ‘Do you have any particular reasons to believe that Kennedy-Jack is in danger?’

Sandy turned her extraordinarily blue eyes on Stevie and blinked.

They filled with tears.

‘He’s the most famous baby on the planet. Everyone wants him. The paparazzi, my fans, the talk shows, the magazines. It’s not right.’

‘Well, it’s true that the children of high-profile or celebrity parents are more likely to be a target because they are simply more visible to kidnappers.’ Stevie kept her voice gentle but business-like. It was her job to paint an accurate—but not alarmist—picture of the risks generally faced by people in Sandy Belle’s position.

‘Also the wealth of the parents is often advertised—trade publications, rich lists, gossip magazines—and this can tempt criminals. The movements of the child and the parents on many occasions are also known in advance: public appearances, premiers, parties, holidays. This makes the kidnapper’s job easier, and so again, more tempting. But there are also simple things that can be done to reduce the risk.’

‘Like what?’ A single diamond tear was rolling down Sandy’s perfect cheek.

Stevie noticed that Sandy’s nose didn’t run, or go pink, or swell like hers did when she cried. Sandy cried beautifully.

‘The simplest and most effective deterrent to kidnapping is privacy,’ she began. ‘You can start with an in-depth cyber-stalking report. Then at least you know how much people can find out about you. I’m guessing your phone number is already de-listed. You should get rid of any personalised number plates, for example, and try and avoid ostentation—flashy jewellery, lavish parties, cars.’

Stevie was deliberate in her emphasis. Douglas Hammer had, at last count, a yellow Lamborghini Murcielago LP 640 with nappa leather upholstery by Versace, a red Ferrari, a Mercedes Gull Wing—the one with the doors that lift like wings—painted metallic orange, and a convertible Rolls Royce Phantom in electric blue with a polished stainless-steel hood. These were not vehicles that had been chosen for discretion.

‘Most importantly you should restrict the circumstances under which you—and especially your child—are photographed.’

Sandy’s fingers were tearing at her tissue. She threw it on the floor and grabbed another.

‘But we’re celebrities. People have to know about us. I won’t have Kennedy-Jack growing up in a climate of fear and repression, too afraid to go out.’ Sandy crumpled her robe and looked up defiantly. ‘I will not give in to the criminals!’

Sandy was magnificent in her defiance. Stevie had heard her utter that last line wonderfully as Dot Fellows in Eat the Rich: A Courtroom Drama. But she did wonder how much of what she was saying was actually sinking in.

Sandy got up and began to pace.

‘Where is Kennedy-Jack now?’ Stevie asked.

‘With his nannies.’

‘Where are his nannies?’

‘They said, um . . .’ Sandy looked flustered. ‘Wait. I know. I had a bath this morning . . . he was in the next room because I could hear him watching TV. I had a large skinny chai brought up from Starbucks and it was hot so I burned my tongue . . . CeeCee gave me a pedicure . . . Ray called from LA about the promotions tour, again. He is driving me crazy . . . and then Douglas . . . No. He was tanning . . . the nannies took Kennedy-Jack . . .’ Sandy’s face was a wonder of concentration.

The bedroom door opened and in strode Douglas Hammer, beaming. He headed straight for Stevie, his right hand
extended.

‘Thank you so much for taking the time,’ he grinned. ‘Sit down, make yourself completely at home.’ He had thrown on a white shirt and looked tough and tousled, as if he had just woken from a particularly handsome sleep.

Stevie took the hand. ‘Stevie Duveen, Hazard Limited.’

‘Stevie, that’s an unusual name. Is it a family tradition?’

‘Dougie,’ Sandy’s little voice peeped from the corner.

‘Yes, honey?’ he moved to her side.

‘Dougie, Stevie was just asking where Kennedy-Jack was and—’ ‘Oh, KJ? He’s with his nannies. They’ve taken him to the park.’

‘How many nannies does KJ have, Mr Hammer?’ Stevie asked.

‘Call me Douglas, please.’ He twinkled his eyes.

‘Alright, Douglas.’

‘Ah, he has three nannies, well, two brunettes and a “manny”. I didn’t want him growing up only under female influences, you know? Not that I’m ever far from his side.’

‘Do you have any specific reason to be concerned about Kennedy-Jack’s safety, Douglas?’

He leaned in conspiratorially, brushing his forelock with perfected absentmindedness. ‘Yes. Yes I do.’

A knock on the door and a beetle appeared with a tray. ‘Mushroom tea anyone?’

Stevie had to accept a steaming cup. She would have preferred coffee but it was not offered. Stevie disliked herbal teas unless she was unwell, but she shouldn’t be rude. She sipped.

The tea tasted as if it had been made by steeping a laundry hamper full of football socks in boiling water then running it all through a little sieved dirt.

‘Lovely, thank you.’ Stevie gently laid her cup and saucer on the bedside table and moved away from it.

‘Actually, Miss Duveen, we’d appreciate it if you’d do an interview for us, you know, telling the public how Kennedy-Jack is in danger—’ Stevie felt obligated to interject with ‘Please call me Stevie.’

‘Douglas, Stevie has some great stuff on cyber-stalking, how kidnapping gangs are stalking our baby on the internet.’

Douglas nodded sagely. ‘I’m not surprised. Quick work, Stevie.’

Before Stevie could explain that it was only a possibility that had to be considered in every case such as theirs, Douglas had sat down next to her and lowered his voice.

‘We believe there are powerful people who want us silenced,’ he confided. ‘We are making a documentary about our lives at the moment and it is one of the themes that is going to feature heavily. I’m producing and directing.’

Stevie considered this for a moment. ‘I’m sure it will be a tremendous success, Douglas, but I need to understand exactly what this has to do with Hazard Limited’s services and the threat to your son.’

‘It’s simple.’ Douglas Hammer gave a modest smile. His feet, Stevie noticed, were immaculately pedicured. ‘As you may know we—well, me in particular—have been very vocal about the corruption and evils of our administration. I’ve spoken out about this on many occasions on Larry King Live, Oprah, Jay Leno, Saturday Night Live.’

Sandy jumped into the conversation. ‘Everyone was talking about that the next day, Dougie.’

‘Look, the point is,’ Douglas sat up a little, his white shirt gaping nicely for effect, ‘that certain people in the administration are afraid of the power I have to change people’s minds. Say what you like, but the public listen to actors. They are the voice of the people, for the people.’ He paused a moment to let the line sink in. ‘Since our activism—especially since we started filming—’

The door opened again and the man with the video camera appeared. He zoomed in on Douglas, who now spoke to camera.

‘Since we started filming this documentary, things have begun to happen.’

‘What sort of things, Doug?’ asked the man with the camera, panning up to Sandy, softly lit by the floor lamp, then back to Douglas.

‘There’s been a campaign to smear me for starters—the trumped-up drink-driving charge, the lies about what I said to the police officer. I am no racist. Never in my life.’
And me. Sandy turned aflame with outrage to the video-man. ‘The paparazzi have become vicious. It’s positively criminal and disgusting. We just want to live normal lives like a normal family.’

Stevie watched Sandy shed another perfect tear, this one digitally immortalised.

‘Has anyone specifically threatened you or your family?’ Stevie was trying to get the meeting back on track. The video-man swung his recorder towards her. Stevie immediately switched off the bedside light and turned her face away, into the darkness.

‘Turn that off please. I won’t be filmed.’

Douglas gestured to the man who stopped filming. ‘There’ll be time for that later, man. It’s okay.’ He turned back to Stevie. ‘Nothing specific but it’s more a feeling—’ His eyes narrowed into a handsome squint. ‘Do you know what I mean? An instinct for danger.’

One of the hairdressers stuck his head into the room. ‘You’ve got flowers, Sandy! Gorgeous ones!’

An enormous bouquet was brought into the room, the uniformed porter staggering under its weight.

‘Read the card please, Dougie.’ Sandy lay back on the pillows.

She seemed to have become weak and fragile under the weight of her worries.

Douglas hopped over on nimble brown feet.

‘They’re from Kofi. Here, wait. Turn the camera back on. I want to do that again. From the top.’

‘Who could they be from? Read the card, Dougie,’ Sandy asked on cue.

‘They’re from Kofi, honey. He sends his warm wishes.’ Douglas gave his wife a loving smile. ‘You see, we have good friends on our side.’ He swung to camera. ‘Okay. Cut.’

Stevie was bewildered. Looking around the room she saw a photo of Nelson Mandela and the Hammer-Belles. It was signed: Nelson. They certainly collected some interesting friends.

The bedroom door opened yet again and in came the three nannies and Kennedy-Jack. Sandy and Douglas rushed over to coo, the video back on. The baby was swaddled, his face all but invisible. That was one good thing at least. Stevie stayed in the shadows, watching.

‘We’ve been down at Lilywhites looking for those miniature golf shoes you wanted for KJ. Deadly cute! Then we took him to Hamleys. He loved that!’

The nannies had not been at the park at all. Kennedy-Jack’s parents had had no idea where their baby was. Stevie counted. There were now ten people in the room with Kennedy-Jack, and more in the suite outside. If the threat to the child was serious, this was a problem.

Household staff had to be vetted for any criminal backgrounds, or financial difficulties that might make them vulnerable. Perhaps some psychological evaluation for the nannies and the ‘manny’ . . . It would also have to be explained to Douglas and Sandy that they should take a close interest in the personal lives of those who worked for them, especially the live-in staff. Kidnappers often established personal relationships with assistants or nannies in order to get inside information on the family.

‘I’ll put a package together tonight and we can discuss your needs further, including specifics, when you feel you have the time.’

Stevie would suggest meeting at Hazard HQ next time. There might be fewer distractions.

Sandy put a hand on Stevie’s arm as she collected her bag and stood to leave. ‘You will help us won’t you Stevie? We’re terrified for little KJ. If people like the Beckhams have kidnap threats, well . . . Our baby is much more famous. Do you see?’

Then Stevie understood exactly the kind of package the Hammer-Belles wanted: non-intrusive, highly visible, very cosmetic, very expensive. Even when it came to peril, they had to be in more danger than all the other celebrities.

‘We will tailor our services to suit your specific situation and I hope you will be satisfied.’ She was well-practiced at sounding reassuring. ‘If security circumstances change, the contract has built-in flexibility to allow us to respond accordingly.’ In other words, if a threat actually became tangible, Hazard could quickly upgrade security.

Stevie shook hands with both Hammer-Belles. ‘Try to live discreetly,’ she added. ‘It’s really the best defence.’

As she was jostled through the suite door by a team of photographers from _Hello_ magazine, Stevie marvelled at the winds of attention that were needed to fill the Hammer-Belle sails. It had been a charade, a waste of time.
Clouds of drizzle swept over Green Park. Stevie hurried on past the wet pigeons, the slick bare trees, over the sleeping daffodils buried under the frozen earth. It was only three o’clock and it was gloomy, the day already dead.

‘Daylight never even made it today,’ she said aloud, startling the pigeon stuck to the rubbish bin. Looking down at her sodden ballet shoes, she began to regret her impulse to walk back to her hotel. The slimy black boughs dripped water down her collar and she drew her coat more tightly round her shoulders.

Two girls were sitting on a park bench in front of her. Stevie noticed them because it was odd weather for sitting out. Both were wearing skin-tight jeans, black puffer jackets and large hoop earrings. Their shoes were even less suitable than hers—patent-leather stilettos. They must have been sitting there a while because they were wet through.

One girl was talking on the phone. She had red hair and she was crying. Mascara and eye shadow had pooled in a bruise under each eye. Her friend had dark curly hair pulled high up off her face. She sat as still as ice, watching the girl on the phone. Even from a distance, Stevie noticed their nails, extraordinary talons, one set painted in fluorescent—almost ecstatic—yellow, the other pure white.

They might be strippers, thought Stevie, with those nails, those skinny legs and pale faces . . . As Stevie approached, she overheard the red-haired girl, her voice trembling into the phone.

‘They know it’s me. They’re going to fuck me up.’

As Stevie passed, turning for a moment to look into the rain-spattered faces, the smeared eyes, she realised with a shock that the girls couldn’t have been more than fifteen. Stevie kept walking.

They’re going to fuck me up. She wanted to stop—Who is? What have you done? You’re only children!—but she didn’t. She walked on. It felt horrible.

What would have happened if she had stopped? And asked what was wrong, offered help? They would probably have snarled at her like frightened dogs. It was too late now. On she hurried, through the damp. And yet, Stevie couldn’t get the girls out of her mind. Fifteen years old—they should be in school, dreaming of their first kisses, shopping with their mothers, not trembling on a wet bench anticipating violence. Much was wrong with the state of the world, she thought, and it seemed like so little could ever be done to fix it.

Someone else would have stopped and spoken to the girls on the bench but she had passed them by. She had proven herself a coward. She spent her days organising protection for the prominent names that asked for it. Some had good reason, some had a bad conscience; to others security was a symbol of status, a way to show people that their impact on the world was potentially so great that they were wanted dead. Still others felt themselves to be so exceptional that, in an era when random violence was vogue, they would somehow be singled out for misfortune above all others. But it was girls like these, vulnerable and hunted on a park bench, that most needed protection and who were most unlikely to get it.

Stevie thought of Pound’s famous image from the Paris metro.

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.*

Only the picture in Stevie’s head was charged with menace and fear. Girls all over the world were sitting on wet park benches and standing on railway platforms and crouching in the lobbies of cheap hotels, quietly shaking, because no one could protect them. That is what it meant to be utterly alone.

Stevie looked back. The trees and the girls and the grey paths had melted into darkness. In the distance twinkled the lights of the Ritz, where very different lives were being lived.

Her mind, trained to assess, placed the Hammer-Belle situation neatly into a package that would be written up, insured and sold to the famous family. If it met with their approval, Stevie might even be able to wash her hands of the whole thing, providing security circumstances for the family didn’t change.

By the time she had finished thinking through the presentation of their requirements she would give to David Rice later that evening, Stevie found herself in front of Number One, London. It was the residence of the Duke of Wellington and his family. She stopped a moment to consider the miniature palace.

It had been a warm evening—if you could believe it had ever been warm—and there was a small party in the basement there after a dinner or a ball. Stevie couldn’t remember now where they’d been before, but she’d worn a long dress, silk tiger print.

The entrance to the basement was down the side. One of his friends played silly show tunes on an old piano. There was a makeshift bar with half-empty bottles of mainly gin and everyone had danced. She’d thought at the time that she was in love.

*Keep walking, Stevie.* She forced herself back into the present.
Rotten Row was lit by lampions. The broad, dirt avenue had once been the place for London society to see and be seen, a constant parade of horse and feather, but this afternoon very few people were out walking, one or two with dogs. She had ridden along here many times, loving the view from high up on a horse—you could almost see into the windows of the first-floor flats. When everything had gone wrong, Stevie had done miles on horseback, galloping through the woods outside Zurich, trusting her horse to find a path, not caring that the branches clawed at her face, that the horse sometimes stumbled on the slippery forest floor, for once not caring about danger. It had helped keep her sane.

She took a small detour to the right and stopped on the bridge over the Serpentine. The water below was partly covered in a grey, frozen slush. Sleeping white swans seemed stuck in place, beaks tucked under their wings like shy children. The winterscape appeared to mirror a general heartlessness everywhere that was not evil but simply did not care enough.

Stevie dropped a rock into the river. *He just doesn’t love you.* It was that easy and that hard all at once.

She looked around for another rock but there were none. *Girls should not be alone in parks at night. Silly thoughts and possibly greater dangers lie in wait.*

Stevie hurried along, past the gold stature of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s tribute to her beloved husband when he died from typhoid at the age of forty-two. Truly, thought Stevie, this is a monument to behold. For all the stiff upper lips and morals and disguise of feelings for which her reign was known, for Queen Victoria to commission a monument the size of the giant Afghan Buddha of Bamiyan was a glorious and unfettered public declaration of love. It was a thing to be greatly admired.

The evening drizzle was turning to sleet. Her toes were squelching. Stevie crossed the road, passed the Albert Hall, fluttered down through Queens Gate and into her hotel.
MOSCOW, THAT SAME NIGHT

So far, Valery Kozkov remained unconvinced of Henning’s idea.

‘What reasonably can a young woman do here in Moscow on her own?’ he asked his long-time friend. ‘She won’t make it. Or she’ll get someone killed.’

‘The alternative is to wait—’

‘I can’t wait. I am the rat in the trap.’ He spoke with his eyes closed. Henning could hardly hear him. ‘Why is no one contacting me?’

‘I don’t know, Valery. I can only assume they are waiting for the pressure to build. You have a reputation, deserved, for being incorruptible . . .’

The other man opened his eyes, rimmed red, swollen with strain. ‘The police are corrupt or inept. The politicians are corrupt or inept—no one can trust anybody. For all I know, either could be behind this.’

‘I don’t promise you Stevie can do anything,’ Henning said. ‘But she has some experience in this sort of thing. She is not perfect but she is someone you can trust. That must be worth something.’

Kozkov’s head fell forward and hung there, too exhausted to finish the nod.

Stevie was early for her meeting with David Rice but she couldn’t face sitting alone in her room. She ordered a gin and tonic at the hotel bar. The barman at the Gore was quick and generous with his gin. It was one of the many small reasons that Stevie liked to stay there.

Her home was Zurich but she was in London so often on assignment that the Gore, despite being unFashionably sandwiched between an art school and the run-down Bulgarian embassy, felt almost like a second home. It was also within easy walk of the dinosaur skeletons at the Museum of Natural History and the Serpentine River, and she was highly unlikely to run into anyone she knew. Him especially.

Not that she cared.

The high-vaulted ceiling, the wooden floors and walls, the carved staircase, the worn leather furniture felt almost Gothic. The fire was the brightest light in the room. Stevie settled herself in an armchair, stretching her frozen feet out towards the flames.

Two men in shirtsleeves and braces were sitting on a sofa on the other side of the room. They were staring at her. She had always looked quite odd by firelight. Her skin was so pale that she absorbed the glow of the flames and appeared translucent. Her shoulders were sharp and her silhouette narrow; in the shadows she could become invisible. It was a quality she often used to her advantage.

Stevie took a sip of her gin, sank into her chair and disappeared. The two men looked away, puzzled at having completely lost her.

Suddenly David Rice appeared, overcoat slung over his arm, striding to her rescue.

‘Ah, Stevie! Hiding?’

‘I didn’t feel like talking to anyone.’

‘You rarely do.’ He sat down, rested his cane on the armchair and ordered a whisky. ‘Perhaps it’s the weather.’

He looked at her with his grey eyes. They never flickered—they were as strong as steel and Stevie always felt like they could see right into her.

She looked away. ‘I met with the Hammer-Belles this afternoon. There have been no specific threats but they feel generally vulnerable and they want people to know they are protected,’ she filled him in on the situation. ‘I get the feeling highly visible security is what they’re looking for: bodyguards, big cars, patrol dogs—the works. I also recommended awareness training but I’m not convinced they will take that up.’ Stevie paused to light a cigarette. ‘I think their whole outfit is a bit chaotic—the entourage especially could present a security problem.’ She went on to describe the situation at the Ritz.

As she and Rice discussed the details of the package they would put together for their new clients, Stevie felt a warmth spread through her. David Rice had that effect on her: calming, reassuring, comforting. She admired him
tremendously.

Rice had known Stevie since she was a small girl. He’d met her parents in the Carpathian Mountains one particularly rainy spring. They had been trapped together for days in a mudslide and began one of those strong friendships that are forged in adversity.

When Stevie went to live with her grandmother in Switzerland, she and Rice had all but lost touch. It wasn’t until she was in her fourth year at Oxford that she looked him up again. She had warned him she wanted to come and work for him and they’d met for lunch at The King’s Arms.

It was pouring with rain that day. Stevie stumbled in, more drowned rat than fiercely competent future employee.

‘I’ll have the fish pie,’ she’d ordered confidently, knowing it was important to appear decisive in interviews, because this informal lunch was, no matter how carefully they both dressed it in the guise of friendship, an interview.

Rice had changed little from the strong, booming presence she remembered from her mother’s kitchen, her father’s garden terrace. The memory was painful and yet pleasantly familiar all at once. Stevie felt her heart beat a little faster and she had the curious sensation, looking at David’s strong hands and broad face, that she had come home.

She waited for David to speak first.

‘My goodness. You’ve changed, Stevie Duveen.’

‘Well, you haven’t, David Rice, not a bit.’

The powerful man sighed and raised an eyebrow. ‘If only that were true.’

There was another silence. David broke it again: ‘I believe in plain speaking, Stevie. I don’t like the idea of you coming to work for me. Mine is not a pleasant world and it can be dangerous. I don’t think it is what either of your parents would have wanted. Our firm is mostly ex-military. It wouldn’t suit you at all. Surely there are a million other wonderful things you could do with your life.’

Stevie shook her head. ‘I want to work for you. If Hazard won’t consider me, there are other risk-assessment agencies I can approach.

As for my skills, I may not have the obvious background, but I can get by in seven languages, and I have very good intuition.’ Stevie paused to take a mouthful of her fish pie and slow her words down. She had to appear imperturbable.

‘Surely you have missions that require someone of a rather more unassuming appearance? My greatest advantage is my discretion: I am taken for granted, overlooked, invisible; I slip through the cracks of life.

What better qualification could there be?’

Rice fixed her with his granite eyes and said nothing for a very long time. Stevie held her breath and his gaze, every inch of her steel core longing for him to say yes.

Rice shook his head. ‘A little slip of a thing like you wouldn’t even survive the most basic training.’

Fury rose in Stevie’s slender throat but she forced it down with a dry swallow. She looked at Rice with clear and steady eyes, and when she spoke her voice was quiet. ‘Don’t forget what I have already survived, David.’

And so, a few weeks later, she found herself on Bodmin Moor. It was a freezing day, all sleet and mud and grey skies. There were five of them on the Hostile Environment training course, designed to prepare people for work in conflict zones.

On Day Two, they were driven to a massive underground bunker.

At the far end, three walls had been constructed, one of bulletproof glass, one of brick and one of breezeblock.

‘Which one,’ the muscled instructor asked the group, ‘would you feel safe behind if shots were fired?’

One man, a reed-thin journalist in spectacles with a formidable reputation, bravely answered, ‘All three.’

Shots suddenly rang out. The first hit the bulletproof glass, pockmarking it softly like a raindrop on a pond; a second, a third—the journalist began to smile—until the fourth shot shattered the entire wall. More shots, the tang of gunpowder, booming echoes of violence in the empty hangar. All three walls smashed.

‘People,’ the instructor barked. ‘It takes four shots to shatter bulletproof glass, only two shots to smash through a brick wall, and a single shot will pass through a breeze block. Conclusion: you are not safe.’

Stevie shivered: no one was.

There was a night of drinking at the local pub. The journalist, it turned out, had written a stinging exposé on a
particular group of rogue soldiers in the military. He was heading to Gaza the following week and he was joking about how he would be glad to get away from England: he was more frightened of the rogue soldiers and their friends in England than the missiles in the Strip.

Day Three found the five of them on a defensive driving exercise on some wild country roads in the moors. It was Stevie’s turn at the wheel of the massive jeep; she was sitting on a pile of folders and coats so she could see clearly over the steering wheel. The heavy tyres skidded and churned in the mud as she fought with the gears for traction on the slippery roads. The rain was now pouring down and it took all her strength just to handle the wheel and gear stick at the same time.

From behind the curtain of rain, Stevie suddenly saw another 4WD parked on the road, blocking access. She slowed down. Rocks on either side of the track meant she couldn’t pass without going some way back and onto the moors. All at once, the back doors of the parked jeep were flung open and four men in black balaclavas raced towards them.

Stevie instinctively hit reverse and shot off backwards down the treacherous road. The pursuers dashed back into their vehicle and followed, gaining fast. Stevie spun the wheel and shifted gears again, this time shooting off-road into the moor, running parallel to the road.

‘Aren’t there dreadful bogs on these moors?’ she shouted above the roar of the engine.

Mark, the journalist, nodded. ‘Big enough to swallow a car.’

Stevie glanced into the rear-vision mirror: the jeep was close behind. She floored the gas, skidding on the wet grass. ‘Do you think those men are part of the course?’ she asked nervously. They had been warned to expect surprises throughout the day.

The pursuers were driving them towards the rocks, knowing a jeep had no hope of passing there. Stevie looked over to the left and onto the moors. It was too risky to take the jeep across them if this was just a training exercise. There was a real risk that she would drown everyone in the car in a bog. She came to a halt at the rocks.

‘I guess we are about to find out.’

The five were hooded and bound; their attackers didn’t speak a word. It was terrifying. What had they said in the briefing on interrogation? *Accept your situation; your captors have physical control and there is nothing you can do about it.*

Stevie fought to keep her mind clear of fear, concentrating on the beating of her heart, the sound of the rain on the car roof, the fact that this was just an exercise . . . It felt very, very real.

The interrogation started in an old farmhouse somewhere. Stevie had focused her energies on remaining very still, becoming very small, disappearing from the radar. Their captors had so far ignored her and directed their attentions to the belligerent tattooed oil worker, and Mark, the reedy journalist.

The two men were now standing in stress positions up against a wall. Stevie wondered how far the interrogators were allowed to take the exercise.

Only one of their captors remained to conduct the interrogation; the other men went to play cards in the next room. Stevie soon noticed that the interrogator—an ugly bulldog of a man—had taken a specific interest in Mark. He began asking him questions about his sources, about the rogue soldiers. Mark was foolishly trying to talk back, perhaps buoyed by the confidence that this was just an exercise.

The bulldog was growing angrier, shouting. He wanted to know where Mark had got the information on the soldiers; it had to, he yelled, be an inside job. Stevie hoped Mark would be sensible enough to realise that, even if this were an exercise, he must absolutely hold out. He would be risking the lives of the whistleblowers if their identities were uncovered.

The very real consequences for this mock interrogation brought a second wave of fear and doubt. She didn’t trust the bulldog; something was wrong. Could it all be for real? Why had the bulldog singled out Mark? Did he have a real motive behind his questions?

The interrogation continued. When the bulldog produced pliers and Mark wet himself, Stevie decided that, either way, the exercise had gone much further than ‘let’s pretend’. Mark seemed to be on the verge of telling the mutt what he wanted to know. Something had to be done.

*Diversion and escape.*

Stevie suddenly started screaming. The men playing cards in the other room came running in; the bulldog stopped his psychological torture.
Stevie screamed higher, louder, hysterical now. ‘I can’t take it! I’m frightened! I want to go home!’

The bulldog laughed. The other men glanced uneasily at each other.

Surely they would be nervous of causing any real damage; this was supposed to be an exercise. And in Stevie’s experience, hysterical women made most men feel terribly nervous . . .

Stevie let out another bloodcurdling scream and began banging her head against the wall. One of the men rushed over to stop her. He untied her hands; Stevie sobbed into them, rocking back and forth.

‘I want to use the bathroom,’ she finally stuttered. Her jailer lifted her and helped her into the corridor, showed her a small door. Stevie locked it quickly behind her.

As she had hoped, there was a window—tiny, but a window. She shoved it open. Could she possibly fit through it? Certainly not in her heavy Shetland Island knit cardigan and massive boots.

She stripped to her thermals and hoped years of school gymnastics would be enough to get her through. She pushed herself off the far wall and dived sideways through the opening.

She crashed head-first onto the sodden ground outside, her legs still half inside, her hip tearing painfully on the sharp window catch. She pulled herself off the ground and limped towards the captor’s jeep. It was the only vehicle in the yard.

Hardly daring to hope she would, she found the keys shoved up behind the sunvisor and started the massive engine. She revved it loudly, hoping it would be heard inside the farmhouse. As she burned out of the yard, the front door of the farmhouse burst open, men spilled out, angry shouts. They did not have guns. Stevie allowed herself a small, gleeful smile. She hoped her escape would be enough to distract the bulldog from his persecution of Mark; she also hoped that the bulldog would feel as humiliated as he’d made Mark feel, that one had got away.

Stevie sped along the road, not caring where she was headed, until her phone showed there was enough reception to make a call.

David Rice said even less than usual as Stevie recounted her concerns.

‘The man wants real information—things that could get people killed if Mark talks. I think it’s dangerous and irresponsible, even if it is just training.’

‘And Stevie, where in God’s name are you?’

‘I have absolutely no idea. Somewhere on the moor—my phone just says “Bodmin” which isn’t very helpful. I took their jeep and now I’m driving around, looking like a mad woman in my thermal underwear . . .’

There was a long pause. Then Rice came on again, ‘Head north, you’ll come to a village. Check in at the local pub and wait for someone to collect you.’ And with that he was gone.

It turned out that the bulldog, having overheard Mark’s tales in the pub, had jumped at the chance to do some old army friends a favour by getting the name of the whistleblower at the source of Mark’s story. A full report of what happened on the hostile environment training course was requested by Hazard. As a result, David Rice began training staff and clients in-house, mock-kidnappings were struck from the training books, and Stevie Duveen found a letter in her college pigeon hole a week later offering her a job at Hazard as a regional security analyst.

That had been eight years ago. Hazard was her world now and she was good at her job. The family connection only drew Stevie closer to her boss, who was barely ten years younger than her father would have been, had he lived. Sometimes Stevie thought Rice felt it too, the bond. He was her anchor in a floating world.

‘So, how are you?’ Rice asked, still as stone, waiting for an answer.

He could be quite disconcerting when he wanted to know something that Stevie didn’t want to tell. She could rarely hold out long with him. She excused herself by remembering that he was, after all, a trained interrogator.

‘I’m fine.’

That silence.

‘I’ll be thirty-one next month.’

Nothing.

It would be easier to give in now and get it over with. She took a large gulp of her gin.

‘To be honest, it’s been a little difficult because of the publicity. He’s on every newsstand with Norah Wolfe, all the headlines about how fabulous they are, how extraordinary his talent. It would be easier not to be reminded.’

Stevie couldn’t shut the memory out. She had been deeply in love with Joss Carey. Nothing could change that fact. He had been an unlikely choice for her—although perhaps it was Joss who had chosen Stevie. He was a painter,
enormously and romantically good looking—beautiful, in fact—the fifth son of a prominent family, the
misunderstood misanthrope with the frayed collar, the paint-flecked hands, the gentle eyes. His was a very different
world to Stevie’s—creative and sensuous, with padded edges and bleeding lines.

In Joss’ world, time did not move in a straight line, if it moved at all; life was lived in rumpled bed sheets at noon,
on an old velvet sofa in a crumbling studio, surrounded by jam jars of flowers and the overwhelming smell of
linseed oil and turpentine. His world was everything Stevie’s wasn’t.

She had met him through her friend Charlie at a party, in a strange old house off Eaton Square. Joss had sat with
her on a window ledge full of red geraniums and talked to her about the capriciousness of the muse. Stevie had just
returned from a week on an oilrig supply ship in the Caspian Sea and the contrast had charmed her. She’d never met
anyone like Joss Carey.

As he leaned in and lit her cigarette, his large eyes had fluttered like brown moths over her face until they came to
rest on hers. He gazed at her for a long time before he spoke. ‘You have the most extraordinarily luminous quality
about you. I find your face fascinating.’

Stevie blushed and laughed; compliments were not a thing she was particularly used to.

‘I’d like to paint you. Would you do me that honour? I need to see if I can capture your essence on canvas—if it’s
possible. Which I don’t know yet. Will you agree to sit for me?’

Stevie nodded, flattered to have been asked, flattered to have been found luminous and fascinating by someone so
gorgeous.

The very next week, autumn became winter. Joss arrived at Stevie’s hotel with a huge smile and a primrose
cradled in his palm like a tiny bird.

‘It’s wonderful, Joss,’ Stevie said, utterly enchanted by the delicate offering lying in the rough painter’s palm,
returning the smile.

Joss put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in tight, kissing the top of her head as if he had known her
forever. ‘Ah, you see, Stevie? I was right about you. You have all the answers already. The true secret of happiness
lies in being able to find joy in the details of life. If you can do that, nirvana is yours.’

They walked out of the hotel and into Hyde Park, strolling arm in arm around the circular duck pond, then
northwards towards Notting Hill.

Joss lived in a large airy studio, with big windows filled with bare treetops. The walls were covered in colours and
postcards and feathers and shards of mirror and graffiti—the whole room was a giant collage. It was like nothing
Stevie had ever seen before.

‘I’m a hoarder,’ he laughed. ‘Can’t you tell? Awful vice but I can never let anything beautiful pass me by without
grabbing it.’ He turned to Stevie, his brown eyes warm and full of light. ‘Like you, Stevie Duveen.’ He kissed her
ever so gently on the lips then laughed again.

‘Why do you really want to paint me?’ Stevie asked.

‘Painting is my way of seeing things,’ Joss smiled. ‘It’s the way I understand the world.’

Joss sat her on his old velvet sofa and set a new canvas on the easel. Stevie sat, her shoulders still, her fingers
turning the primrose that had by now become so much more than a primrose, and Joss began to paint her.

There was soft music in the air, the music of gypsies, and Stevie felt full of magic. Joss’ world was so different to
hers, so unplanned, so romantic, so free. Suddenly she wanted a piece of it; she couldn’t remember what it felt like
not to always be responsible and organised and utterly dependable, forever locked in a tight cage of control. She
couldn’t remember what it felt like to be young . . .

She looked at Joss, a paintbrush behind his perfect, paint-flecked ear. He glanced at her, then back at the canvas,
then up to her face again.

The way he stared at her, his intensity, made her feel like she was being seen for the first time in her life.

Could Joss set her free?

Her heart gave an almighty thump and she knew she had no choice but to try to find out.

‘I should have known, David,’ she said, shelving the postcards from the past. ‘For all my training in risk
assessments, I didn’t see it coming. There were no signs. No indicators. It was . . .’ she swallowed hard, ‘completely
unforeseen.’

Stevie had arrived unexpectedly from Zurich one weekend. It was three weeks since she’d last seen Joss—too
long—but her work had taken her to Jakarta and it had been impossible to come home sooner. She had walked into
Joss’ studio and smiled to herself as she took in the familiar disarray, the sofa, the rumpled sheets of the bed in the corner.

There was a new canvas on the easel, the beginnings of a bare breast that was not hers. She didn’t think anything of it, until she noticed a primrose amongst the bed sheets.

Stevie’s legs began to shake. She sat on the velvet sofa that had seen so much happiness and wept.

Joss returned right then, his arm around a stunning, laughing girl.

It was Norah Wolfe, the super-cool supermodel with the shaggy blonde hair and the rock star father.

Stevie remembered being with Joss at Annabel’s when he had first spotted Norah across the room, him sneering, ‘Famous for nothing.’ Stevie had heard the contempt in his voice, but she also remembered that the contempt had been mixed with fascination.

Stevie turned back to Rice and gave a little laugh. ‘He actually smiled at me when he saw me there.’ But she remembered too well how it had felt to see her future happiness catch flame and burn to fine ash.

‘Now they’re London’s hottest couple and his paintings are selling.

He always told me he despised celebrity.’

‘Insignificant people crave celebrity because it reassures them of their relevance. Joss is no different. He’s a small man.’ Rice’s tone was withering, his voice now full of heat. Stevie was surprised and touched. It was very rare for the man to let his composure slip even the slightest degree.

She would have liked to say something, to reach out and touch the grizzled soldier sitting opposite her, but the moment passed and when Rice spoke again, the chill in his voice had returned. ‘You dodged a bullet, Stevie.’

But Stevie had not escaped unharmed. Somehow she couldn’t shake the feeling, in her heart, in her stomach, that she had been found to be unlovable, that she had in some way failed as a woman. And she hated the fact that David knew.

‘Joss was so different. I thought artists were different—passionate and true—’ she stopped herself, realising how naive she sounded.

Rice said nothing. With a small gesture, he ordered Stevie another gin and tonic.

‘He made me believe he saw qualities in me that no one else did.

That’s very attractive. It makes you feel special. Unique. I loved him.’

Her voice trembled a fraction, the tiniest warble of pain.

‘Oh you poor darling.’ Rice’s words barely rising above a growl.

Stevie blushed. He had never called her that before. She took the clean napkin he was holding out to her; he had seen the secret tears in her eyes.

‘Your parents were both mad on artists, especially painters, had lots of them as friends,’ he said, trying to offer some consolation. ‘But painters are still people, you know, and share insecurities and desires and weaknesses with the rest of us humans.’ Rice took a long sip of his drink and fixed Stevie with his gaze. ‘You have to stop seeing yourself through that fool’s eyes. You are special, in my eyes—’ Stevie looked up, startled, her face suddenly hot.

‘—in the eyes of your colleagues at Hazard.’

The mad flutter in her heart died like a day-old moth. Professionally respected. Yes, she supposed she was now. But that was hardly enough to ensure her human credentials.

‘I just feel like a fool,’ she confessed. ‘I had no idea and I still don’t really understand why.’

‘And you’re still heartbroken.’ It was not a question. It was an outcome.

‘It’s hard to just turn love off. You despise them, but they can still make your heart jump.’ Stevie reached for a cigarette and held it in her long fingers, fiddling with the gold band. ‘I did ask him why, you know,

why he had destroyed us so completely.’ Her voice was velvety with pain. ‘He said he had found true love with Norah, that he had to follow his passion and that anything else would be hypocritical.’

Rice made a vicious noise in his throat. ‘I could kill him.’

Stevie gave him a small smile. ‘Thank you, David. He’s not worth it. But the ridiculous thing is, nothing’s felt the same since.’ She looked back down at her hands, still fiddling with the cigarette. ‘I hate it, but it’s the truth.’

Rice glared at her, then decided. ‘You need some time off. That’s all. You’re overdue to take leave. Take a week. Get some rest. You’re no good to me on less than top form.’
‘I’m not sure what I’d do with the time . . .’

‘Sleep, eat, get that worm out of your heart,’ he instructed. ‘One day the right person will come along and you need to be ready to see them when they do.’

‘Did you ever meet the right person, David?’ Stevie knew very little about Rice’s personal life, but she knew he wasn’t married.

Rice glanced at his watch, a Breguet with a brown crocodile strap that he had bought himself when he finished with active service. ‘Right.

Must go. I’m already late, all this nattering.’

Stevie wished he would stay, maybe invite her to dinner, but he didn’t. He left as quickly as he had come.

Watching him leave, Stevie felt very alone. She would book a flight back to Zurich tonight, she decided, and visit her grandmother Didi in the mountains.

Perhaps David was right, but it didn’t stop her hating herself for having placed her happiness in such unsafe hands—in the hands of another person at all. She would not be making that mistake again.

Stevie looked around. The bar had filled up. Elton John was playing at the Albert Hall. The shape of the overcoat standing at the bar was familiar. Her heart sank. Charlie was perfectly nice—in fact many people turned small somersaults just to meet him. He, or rather his father’s title, collected New Best Friends. But she wasn’t in a sociable mood, and Charlie was a close friend of Joss’.

Stevie and Charlie had met at Oxford. Together they had ridden bicycles drunk over perilous cobblestones, celebrated in shabby rooms, shrunken pubs and warm lawns. But they had never been close.

She remembered a Glühwein incident involving homemade fireworks and an enormous yellow teddy bear. Part of the upstairs floor had caved in. Charlie had leapt up in good cheer to urge the revels to continue. The armchair he landed on had wheels; it ran from under him, causing him to fall, jugular first, onto an abandoned glass of Glühwein.

Stevie had seen the whole thing. No one else seemed to notice, as he lay on the floor of his own sitting room, a shard of glass in his throat. He lay as still as a doll. As Stevie knelt down beside him, blood began to pulse from the wound. His pale yellow shirt turned quickly black with blood.

Stevie had pressed her fingers on his neck, as if feeling for a heartbeat, but pressing hard, trying to stop the blood from pumping out. The shard of glass was held in place between her fingers, like a piece of ice that refused to melt. She was afraid that if she pulled it out even more blood would start spurting.

Charlie’s face had turned waxy and he began to perspire. Stevie thought he would die. She whispered things to him, kissed his forehead, covering her own face and hair and hands with his blood. She remembered ambulances, people in green, his mother arriving at 4 am dressed in black mink.

Charlie recovered, but they had never spoken of the incident.

Stevie drew a breath and became visible again. She saw him notice her and approach.

‘Blasted barman tried to give me vodka with my tonic.’ He stood over her, very tall, very thin, very handsome if his eyes hadn’t been quite so close together. A large scar ran horizontally across his neck.

‘You should drink with me,’ Stevie replied mildly. ‘They don’t seem to be as careless. I’m staying here.’

Charlie looked up at the ceiling. ‘Bit gloomy. Still, not much to be cheerful about I suppose.’

Not the conversation Stevie needed tonight.

‘Joss is back from Barbados,’ he said.

Stevie swallowed her panic.

‘He’s been in Barbados with that Norah model.’ If Charlie had any idea of the effect his announcement might have on Stevie, he certainly didn’t show it. ‘Renting a house that belongs to a friend of mine. Terrible hailstorms.’

This was definitely not the conversation Stevie needed tonight.

‘How awful,’ she grimaced. ‘About the hailstorms, I mean.’

Charlie’s gaze slid around the room. His eyes seldom focused for long. It was a curiously unsettling quality.

‘Anyway, we’re all going to the Savages this weekend. Can’t think of anything else to bloody do. Probably be bored out of my mind. Everything bores me at the moment.’

Stevie stared. She realised she had nothing to say to him.

‘I overheard two girls on a park bench today,’ she blurted out.
‘Someone wanted to kill them.’

Charlie’s eyes were drifting again. ‘Really? I suppose that’s what happens to girls who sit on park benches.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Joss’ show is opening tonight. You coming?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘He’s threatening to propose to the girl tonight. She’ll probably say yes, too,’ he snorted. ‘I’ll tell him I saw you.’ He finished his drink in a big gulp.

Stevie found herself checking quickly to make sure the scar was watertight.

He kissed her cheek. It felt like a hen-peck.

‘You don’t look well,’ he called over his shoulder as he left the bar.

It made Stevie marvel. His imperviousness. The world didn’t touch Charlie. Actually, it was more than that. The world didn’t exist outside what he chose to see. Inconceivable that other people had feelings, or cravings, or that ideas mattered, that the world changed every day, that people did things.

Things like marmalade were important to Charlie. She used to think it was all just a front. She had spent time wondering about Charlie when she had first met him, trying to get through to the real person. But Charlie managed to hold the entire world at arm’s length. It was a feat Stevie admired; the strength of will it must take to be so utterly blind.

Stevie asked politely for another drink and lit her second cigarette of the day.

Joss’ exhibition. Propose. He had always said he didn’t believe in forever . . . Had Norah changed all that? And now he would know that she was in town, that she didn’t have the courage to attend. Charlie would be sure to tell him. She would definitely book that flight home tonight.

A man from reception brought her a message slip:

Please phone Henning in Moscow 98 84 63 21.

Stevie stubbed out her cigarette and collected her coat. Henning would cheer her up.

She called from her room. ‘Hello, Henning.’

‘How are you, Stevie darling?’

‘Oh . . . you know.’ It was the second time she’d been called ‘darling’ that evening, the second time her cheeks had heated up—even though Henning often called her that. ‘Charging on—crime, paranoia, celebrity babies, the usual thing.’ She was aiming for ‘cheery’, but didn’t quite get there. ‘Actually it’s driving me a bit mad. I’m taking a week off.’

‘What’s brought all this on?’

Stevie told him about the young girls on the park bench. She couldn’t get the picture of the two of them sitting in the rain out of her mind.

‘They’re haunting me, Henning. Maybe . . .’ Stevie kicked off her shoes. ‘Maybe sometimes I think I’m protecting the wrong people. The clients I saw today are protected in so many other ways: they have money, friends, love, family, every opportunity. Those girls on the bench seemed so alone in the world. No one was going to worry about what happened to them. They seemed so . . . disposable. Does that make any sense?’

‘It’s an awful thought, that some people are disposable.’ Henning understood. His tone told her everything. He understood, he always did. That was the thing about Henning.

There was a long silence on the phone. ‘Small matter, private.’

‘Mmm, let’s see . . . no. Not possible at all I’m afraid. I have a client with a bad toupee who is terrified someone might catch a glimpse of his balding dome in this windy weather. He needs twenty-four-hour surveillance. Anything else I can do for you, Henning?’

‘I’m serious, Stevie.’

‘So am I. Would you mind terribly if I ran a bath while we chatted? This tub takes years to fill and I’m chilled to the bone.’ Stevie ran the taps and began to undress.

When he replied, Henning’s voice sounded a little huskier than usual. ‘It’s a business proposition of sorts. Just a small matter, private.’

‘In Moscow? It’s one of the most crime-ridden cities in the world, rotten with corruption. It’s unlikely to be a “small matter”. Everything is always connected to something bigger.’

In the mirror her face looked particularly pale. Charlie was right, she didn’t look well. No point staring.
‘It’s the head of the Russian Central Bank,’ Henning said. ‘He’s a friend. He wants a threat assessment on him and his family. He’s a good man, an honest man.’

‘Well, I can give you that over the phone.’ Stevie stood in her black bra and panties. Italian lace. She had started wearing beautiful underwear after Joss, to remind herself that she didn’t need a man’s gaze to feel sexy. Sometimes it even worked.

‘Extremely high,’ Stevie said, struggling with the clasp on her fancy bra. ‘Valery Kozkov, right? So far he’s shut down forty-four crooked banks, banned people from the banking industry for life, slapped down some heavy fines and it’s rumoured he’s chasing links between Russian organised crime and elements in the government. His one lucky star is that he is too high up to be killed without the consent of someone very senior in the political machine, but he’s swimming in dangerous waters with both the mafia and the politicians. I’m sure he knows that better than anybody. His family will be in danger, too. Certain elements will want to send him a strong message. They did that to Anatoly Chubais only a few months ago.’

Off. Small naked breasts freed. Stevie pinned her hair back.

‘The landmine by the side of the road outside Moscow?’ Henning asked.

‘Exactly. That wasn’t meant to kill him. The blast was directed away from the motorway, towards the woods. It was set off in front of his car. Fire was only exchanged when Chubais’ bodyguards gave chase to the attackers. He was not meant to die on that road. That sort of message.’

‘And Kozkov is incorruptible,’ Henning reminded her.

‘That is almost a death sentence in itself. He won’t be persuaded to go local?’

‘He feels he can’t trust anyone.’ Stevie could hear Henning flicking his lighter as he spoke. He did that when he was tense. ‘His action on the banks has touched so many shady people in so many different ways. And that includes bank employees and politicians. He doesn’t even know who will be after him most.’

‘And you call this a small matter? It’s way too big for me. Like I said, I do paranoid popstars and synagogues on holy days. You need a team for this. If you want I can put Kozkov in touch with the right people at Hazard.’

The bath was too hot but Stevie slid in anyway and gasped.

‘Sorry. Bath hot. Pheeew.’ She massaged the dark purple fencing bruises dotted on her thigh.

‘Stevie, listen. There’s a particular reason we need you. Five big guys from Hazard won’t do. You speak Russian and you have the right look . . .’

‘It’s not some weird sex thing, is it? Doesn’t hurt to ask,’ she added, when he seemed to choke in response. ‘I once got caught in a very uncomfortable situation on a night train to Budapest that I’d rather not go into.’

‘It’s not “some weird sex thing”, as you put it. I can’t tell you more over the phone. Please just come to Moscow and see for yourself.’

And then came the clincher, as if Henning had read her mind.

‘It might be good for you to get out of London for a few days—get your mind off—’ ‘I’m fine.’

‘You won’t be when you run into him,’ he said grimly.

‘I’m not coming.’
BA 176 took off from Heathrow at 6.35 am. Stevie wondered whether accepting a glass of champagne before breakfast was bad form but decided that as it was not yet light outside, that made it still officially night and so everything was allowed.

She picked at her croissant and tried to read the papers, but the back pages were full of the Hammer-Belle move to London; articles on Joss and Norah Wolfe. Neither subject would improve her mood.

How had she ended up on the flight at all? When it came to Henning, it seemed that saying ‘no’ always, somehow, without Stevie ever really realising how, turned into ‘yes’. His powers of persuasion were maddening—she would make sure to tell him that when she saw him. She smiled to herself: it wouldn’t be long now.

Pale light bled into the sky and Stevie was able to make out the peaks of the Alps way below, jutting from the fog like the tips of slate-grey icebergs. They must be over Switzerland. She wondered if they were flying near . . .

Because she was sure, with the clarity brought by hindsight, that that weekend was when the affair with Norah Wolfe must have started. Or at least, that it was the weekend when, if she had been a little less in love, a little smarter, she would have ended it with Joss Carey.

Stevie had been home in her flat in Zurich when the invitation came. Joss had called from London, suggested a ski weekend in Switzerland. How terribly romantic, Stevie had thought. She would take the little red train up to Arosa on Friday. He would meet her there that afternoon.

Stevie packed her cashmere rollnecks, her furs, her ski boots and a bottle of her most passionate scent. She planned to dazzle him. In among the iced pines, in sleighs wrapped in fairy lights, surrounded by the deep, velvet snow, sitting by chalet fires, she would seduce him all over again.

The last few weeks he’d seemed distant, dreamier than usual. Perhaps this was his way of making it up to her. The ski weekend seemed like the perfect opportunity to show him that she, Stevie Margaret Duveen, was a girl with potential, someone his artistic soul could love deeply.

Stevie arrived at the alpine hotel at noon. A room had been booked in his name and she checked in, expecting him around three. She accepted the manager’s invitation for them to dine formally in the Panoramahalle.

By seven he still hadn’t showed. Joss was never on time, but he was by now very late and no word had been sent. And his telephone was off.

Poor Joss! Had something awful happened?

Just to be sure she went down to the reception to ask if he had arrived. It would be an awful shame to get all worked up about a simple misunderstanding. But no, Herr Carey had yet to show. And es tut mir leid, Fräulein, so sorry, but he could confirm there had been no disastrous plane crashes or derailed mountain trains that day.

Stevie spun through the revolving doors and into the freezing night, her worry building bricks in her stomach. She tried his number again.

Still no answer.

The concierge came running out. ‘Fräulein Duveen, a message for you.’ He handed her a card:

*Herr Carey called with apologies. A pressing engagement kept him in London. He will call you later.*

‘Joss called here? Why didn’t you come and get me?’

‘I suggested this possibility to him but . . .’

The pity in Hans-Peterli Fruhl’s eyes—Stevie automatically read his name tag—said it all.

Stevie was confused. Joss didn’t have pressing engagements . . .

_Dignity. Maintain at all costs. Turn, heel, lift is behind you, up to the fourth floor. Smile at the chambermaid—Guten Abend—no crying, what a funny day, lalala—and I like what they’ve done with the new carpet—_ Safely inside her room Stevie trembled but shed no tears. The evidence for abandonment was accumulating as fast as the snow outside.

She thought about leaving, running away, making an excuse. But then she decided no, that she would stay and enjoy her weekend in the Alps to its fullest. She would not let Joss, or anyone, know she was upset. She would carry on exactly as she was.

Unfortunately, this brave new resolution meant that the fifteen-course dinner in the Panoramahalle would have to be attended. She refused to hide in her room as if she had done something shameful. She phoned down: *Fräulein*
Duveen would be dining alone, *danke*.

Of course, she dressed in black from head to toe: a black cashmere rollneck, her pearls worn on the outside, Chanel ballet slippers. Her hair had been longer then, and she had piled it up to show off her jaw, her large pearl earrings. Most important thing was to line the lower eyelids thickly in kohl, ensuring that she wouldn’t be able to shed a tear without making the most terrible mess.

At her table, she sat composed and still. She brought no novel, no newspaper, no magazine, no notebook and pencil to distract herself from the feeling that eyes were on her. They were.

Older couples wondered where her husband was and had she disgraced herself; the *maître d* was more merciful and wondered what tragedy had befallen her, what darkness. He offered a few words of conversation with each course. Stevie appreciated his kindness but wished he wouldn’t.

Concentration was required.

She practised stoicism and elegance and impenetrability. She would not even allow herself to become invisible. It was good training, she thought, only she was not sure what for. She had mastered the glass of wine alone in a bar a long time ago—not easy but there was a certain masochistic satisfaction in it. But a glass of wine was one thing; a fifteen-course formal dinner in a silent ballroom, quite another.

‘The trick to it,’ her grandmother had explained in one of her many sessions revealing the magic arts of existence to young Stevie, ‘is to not appear as if you are waiting for someone. You must look as if you had always intended to find yourself in exactly this situation.’

A tall man got up from his table and strode in her direction. He was wearing navy woollen trousers and a cashmere jumper covered in a cream *fleur de lys* pattern.

Stevie had noticed him notice her. Possibly, if there had been room in her tormented mind for such thoughts, she would have found him attractive. But tonight, she hoped very much that he would not think it necessary to stop and talk to her. He was very tall.

She concentrated on the untouched quail on her plate. She felt too much kinship with tiny birds to eat anything smaller than a fully grown chicken. She covered the fragile body respectfully with a cabbage leaf.

‘If I may.’

Oh dear.

Stevie looked up. ‘Yes?’

‘I think you’re waiting for the wrong man.’ He had an unusual accent, almost English but unplaceable. His eyes glinted, daring her to take up her end of the conversation.

‘I’m not waiting for anyone.’

‘I can tell by your little feet that you are. They’re very expressive.’

Damn.

She hadn’t even realised she had kicked her shoes off. Her stocking toes were crunched into fists.

‘Well, he’s an artist. He’s not good with time.’ Stevie could hardly convince herself.

‘Will you join us in the meanwhile?’ He smiled and gestured towards a table behind him. He seemed so at ease in his skin and Stevie envied him. ‘Just a dentist and his wife from Zurich, clients of mine.’

Stevie glanced over at his table. An elegant couple sat talking. He was immaculately dressed in a tweed blazer and a salmon-coloured polo neck jumper that would have been disastrous without the perfect winter tan; she wore white cashmere over her slim shoulders and had the glowing skin and well-placed gold jewellery of a Swiss heiress. They did not look like a dentist and his wife. Stevie wondered if the tall man was telling the truth.

‘I think I would prefer to let the solitude sink in. But thank you.’

‘A life unexamined and all that . . . I understand.’ He smiled again and left her.

He’s kind, thought Stevie. And he had left her with elegance.

The thirteenth course was presented with an exaggerated flourish under a silver dome. The subject was quite unworthy of the attention: a pale beige mousse, like a dead mouse.

Three grand old battleaxes rose from the corner table, their meal vanquished, and steamed across the room. They had lacquered helmets of hair, pastel twinsets, pearls, and very large crocodile bags. They could only have been described as formidable.

Stevie looked down at her own bag. It was identical. The man had noticed the similarity, too. It seemed to amuse
Stevie prayed the fourteenth course would hurry up and come. If he cornered her on the way out, she would have no choice but to feign nausea. No one ever argued with that.

But the man didn’t move from his table.

Stevie finished her interminable dinner, having left most of it untouched, and rose. Without glancing at the man, with a nod to the *maître d*, she slipped out.

There were no messages under her door. Joss hadn’t called. What sort of engagement could Joss possibly have to keep him in London?

And so vague . . . Joss didn’t use words like ‘engagement’—especially not words like ‘engagement’. Why hadn’t he wanted to talk to her?

Again Stevie debated calling and decided against it. Joss knew where she was. He would call if he wanted to.

Had her luminosity faded in his eyes . . . was that what was driving Joss incrementally away from her?

Thirty thousand feet above the scene, Stevie accepted a refill of her champagne glass. Somewhere in her crocodile bag, she still had the message that had arrived at her door the next morning, accompanied by a pretty bunch of primroses: *Herr Carey called to say he is devastated he can’t make it.*

Primroses. Like that first one which, held in his palm, had ensnared her heart.

Stevie had opened the curtains and looked out at the mountain. It was so beautiful in the early light. Teardrops crawled like flies from her eyes, pausing a moment on the ridge of her jaw before leaping down and disappearing into the towelling of her robe.

This would not do. The mountain was there and the snow was excellent. If there was ever a time to carry on and enjoy herself tremendously, this was probably it. Crying was ridiculous; she would go to breakfast instead.

The Swiss ski breakfast is a triumph of human achievement: the Bircher müsli, that glorious mess of oats, grated apple and yoghurt; the mountain breads—the *Walliserbrot*, the potato bread, the rye loaves; the displays of mountain cheeses and air-dried meats; the strangely coloured vegetable juices that tasted worse the better they were for you, culminating in a bright green sludge that tasted like old socks and bitter cucumber. No doubt the elixir of life itself. How could anyone feel down when faced with this?

Stevie took a small table by the window overlooking the soft white valley and ordered a pot of black coffee. Then she sauntered blithely to the buffet and chose a slice of thick black bread, an enormous slice of fresh, unsalted butter and a piece of Emmenthal cheese. She felt better already.

The thermometer outside the lobby read –10 degrees Celsius. Stevie thought she had better take the necessary precautions: her biggest fur hat, her fullest goggles, with mirrored lenses and a bright red frame, her warmest ski gear—which happened to be an all-in-one by Jean-Claude Killy in canary yellow. She looked like a cockatoo.

Busy with her boots in the ski room, she suddenly heard a voice over her shoulder.

‘So you decided to stay?’ The tall man from the dining hall was standing behind her, skis in hand.

‘Shouldn’t I have?’

‘I’m sorry. I thought maybe . . . but you look much more cheery this morning.’

Stevie saw that his eyes were on her sunshine ski suit.

‘Well, just because circumstances have changed, it doesn’t mean my wardrobe has to.’

‘The colour is perfect. And my name is Henning.’

‘Stevie.’ They shook hands, then Stevie hurried off for the Weisshorn, the highest peak, determined to escape the advances of everyone in the hotel.

And that was how Stevie had met Henning. They became co-conspirators that weekend, if not friends. He had cheered her admirably and without imposing on her and for that Stevie had been grateful.

When everything had fallen apart not long after, Stevie found herself with a broken heart, puffy eyes, lunching in Zurich at the *Kro-nenhalle* and telling Henning everything over cucumber salad and *Zürcher Geschnetzeltes mit Rösti*. This gushing was most unlike her and she immediately regretted it. She apologised and explained that it was the first time she had been out since the abandonment. That’s what she called it, even though others might have used a different word.

But Henning didn’t seem to mind and Stevie satisfied herself that Henning had no plans of seduction, at least not
in the short term, and that he was probably a decent human being, one who travelled even more than she did and
who made a habit of random acquaintances. Stevie was happy to be one of them for now.

Still, flying to Moscow to see him on some secret mission was almost certainly unwise. If Charlie hadn’t unsettled
her so with his talk of Joss proposing to Norah Wolfe, if she hadn’t seen his face on every bus stop posing next to
the fashion star, she may not have gone at all.

But she wasn’t ready to face the memories all over again—not yet. So, feeling like a coward for the second time
that day, she had fled.

A few days in Moscow would be enough for her to gather her courage and return to her responsibilities. She
would do the assessment for Henning as a favour then she would go home to her flat in Zurich, surrounded by thick
woods, where she could safely hide from the world until David Rice called her back to London.

Thank heavens Henning came to collect her himself from Sherme-tyevo. Moscow’s airport was a battleground,
predictably grim at passport control, with interminable forms asking in-coming passengers to list any electronic
goods, cash, recording devices and so on in their possession. An accumulation of previous visits had taught Stevie to
just answer Nyet to everything. The forms were relics from the time of the Iron Curtain; no one at customs was
interested anymore. Nor do they smile, ever.

The arrivals hall was filled with jostling men in leather jackets, fur hats and cheap shoes—touts, thugs, taxi
drivers, impossible to tell apart. Henning was waiting near the automatic doors, ready to seize her before anybody
else could.

‘Dobri vyecher, stranger.’

‘Henning!’ She kissed him hello on his freshly shaven cheeks. He swooped on her bag, put a protective arm
around her shoulders—it might have gone around twice had she not been wearing her coat—and bustled her through
the crowd of men.

Sensibly he had chosen a dirty black Lada—a crappy Soviet-made car that was as indistinguishable as it was
unreliable. No one would steal it, follow it, or even bother to notice it. When Stevie stepped out into the car park, the
icy brown slush rose above her tiny booted ankle. The air had the faintly sour smell of Russia.

‘Welcome to Moscow.’

‘I didn’t think I would be back so soon.’

The car windows were filthy from the dirty snow mist sprayed up by the traffic. Night had settled and a fog was
creeping in. Only the tail-lights of the other cars, glowing red, and the fuzzy neon of the casino at Pushkinskaya
were bright in the gloom.

They crept down Tverskaya Yamskaya, one of the main boulevards of Moscow. Wide and straight, they seemed
to go on forever.

‘I’ve booked you into the Metropole. It’s not far from the Kozkov’s flat—I’m staying with them.’

‘Oh. Thank you very much. That’s kind of you.’ Stevie was always formal when she was feeling shy. She noticed
Henning hide a smile— something was amusing him.

Stevie considered his profile. It was quite handsome, if you liked the tall and slightly scary type: strong nose—
well, big actually, but it suited him—a square jaw, narrow eyes of a piercing glacier-ice blue. They made Stevie
think of a chink of mountain sky. He should stop smirking at her, though.

He was wearing his herringbone overcoat and a tomato-red scarf. ‘You look rather dashing in your Henningbone,’
she teased.

‘Just trying to keep up with you, Stevie, with all your fluff and pearls.’ He meant her coat and hat. Both were
steel-grey astrakhan, her hat pillbox style, but generous enough to cover the tips of her ears; the coat was tulip-cut,
with full sleeves that ended above the wrist, leaving room for a length of wrist encased in black suede gloves.
Around her neck she wore four strands of pearls, her great-grandmother’s legacy. They never came off, not even in
the bath.

‘Henning, I feel like a bit of a cheat coming all the way here and meeting the Kozkows. I’m guessing there’s
something you’re not telling me, and, well, whatever it is, you can forget it now. I will do an assessment for them,
but that’s it. Hazard have strict protocols.’

‘Just talk to the family. See what you think after you meet them.’

‘It won’t change a thing, Henning.’
The Kozkov residence was on the top floor in a huge, Soviet-style residential block. Like all the other blocks in the street, the common entrance was off the main street, via a number code in the wall that opened double steel doors painted in tatty black.

Another code opened similar doors just inside—this time made of wood—that gave onto a warm and gloomy marble foyer, with a grid of metal mailboxes and a large lift cage. Everything was bathed in a yellow-greenish light that seemed to produce a thick, obfuscating glow rather than illuminate anything.

The front door of the flat was a double door padded in leather. Like the ones downstairs, it was backed in steel and gave onto a second steel door. This was the standard residential fortress of the average Muscovite.

Stevie noticed a water bowl. So the Kozkovs had a dog. That was certainly helpful in terms of personal security. So were the double doors.

These buildings were all designed with a back entrance that led to a lane or courtyard for communal rubbish bins, coal scuttles and the like. The back doors were also steel and armed with codes.

The high crime levels in Moscow meant that basic levels of home security were quite good. It also meant that other residents would be afraid for their own safety as well and unlikely to let any strangers into the foyer.

The disadvantage was that these flats almost certainly had only one way out. It was a legacy of the sub-divisions that had taken place after the fall of communism and people had decided that they might rather like their own bathrooms and kitchens and personal space. Connecting doors had been walled up.

By the time any attackers got to the front door, the inhabitants would be trapped. Only a built-in ‘panic room’ could be of use then. This was a secure room with a steel door and impenetrable walls. It was usually stocked with a satellite phone or transmitter, food, water and a first-aid kit. It had its own air and light supply so these could not be contaminated or shut off by the invaders.

A panic room was designed so the people in the house could survive an attack long enough to be rescued from the outside. Stevie frequently offered them as a home security option for clients, but she herself hated the idea of using one.

Rats in a trap, waiting for the cat’s paw.

Irina Kozkov answered the front door. She was as attractive as a cat: high, wide cheekbones pushing up under navy-blue eyes. Stevie didn’t think it was possible for eyes to be that colour. Her skin had a waxy, slightly yellow quality shared by many Russians, but it was tight and flawless. Irina was dressed in the classic Moscow look: tight blue jeans tucked into high-heeled suede boots trimmed with black fur, thin gold belt, tight black cardigan in cashmere, the neck also trimmed in fur.

Discreet yellow diamonds twinkled at her ears, neck and on her fingers.

‘Dobri vyecher.’ Irina kissed Henning, then greeted Stevie. Irina’s tiny hand was freezing despite the warmth inside.

She led them into a well-furnished sitting room. Silently Irina filled tea glasses from a samovar that bubbled in the corner.

Samovars were a brilliant invention, Stevie thought. They were essentially a large urn that held constantly boiling water. A fixture in homes across Russia and Central Asia, they were usually elaborately decorated. This one was delicately painted with a winter scene from a Russian folk tale: wolves chasing a sleigh. The delicate painter’s brush had picked out fear in the faces of two women as they turned to face the wolves.

Stevie watched as Irina dropped clear golden sugar-rocks into each glass and handed them around. She moved rather robotically for such an attractive woman; her eyes seemed almost dead. Stevie wondered if she was stoned.

Irina handed her a silver cigarette box. It was the only communication she was offering at the moment. Stevie accepted and lit one, grateful for the distraction. Henning was seated on the red flock sofa, carefully stirring his tea.

Music—Tchaikovsky’s 5th symphony—was playing softly in the background. Nobody spoke.

Stevie glanced around the room. The side table near the window held framed photos of the family. Irina and her husband, caught in laughter. Had something horrible happened to Irina to dull those extraordinary eyes?

In the next frame, two children, a boy and a girl—teenagers Stevie guessed—stood in front of a birch forest. It was summer. The sun was behind them and lit their blond hair like halos. They were good-looking children. The flower of Russian youth, the pre-constructed phrase offered itself to Stevie.

Suddenly, under the music, Stevie heard shouting. The voice was muffled by walls and doors, but it was clearly male and angry. She couldn’t quite work out what— Then a second voice, not as loud but obviously not calm,
overlapped it. Henning rose quickly to his feet.

‘Ah,’ he said with an exasperated smile aimed at no one in particular. ‘That will be Vadim and his father. Arguing again.’ He left the room.

The shouting stopped abruptly.

Irina still hadn’t moved.

This was getting stranger with every minute. Stevie couldn’t bring herself to break the silence. After a few moments she heard steps in the hall. Henning returned with Valery Kozkov. The head of the Russian Central Bank, the bravest man in Russia, did not look the part.

‘Stevie Duveen,’ he said, walking towards her. ‘I am pleased you could come.’ He spoke in English, accented but fluent. He was not a tall man, plump but not fat—just covered enough to pad any hard edges.

He took Stevie’s hand in both of his. They were warm and dry; his watery blue eyes soft and rimmed with red. This was a man who had not slept for nights, a gentle man, unassuming and unpresuming. Stevie liked him immediately.

*Damn Henning.*

‘It’s an honour to meet you Valery Nikolayevitch.’ Stevie used Kozkov’s patronymic—glad she remembered it.

Stevie had replied in English too, not in Russian, because that would have suggested that she did not think Kozkov’s English was as good as her Russian. It was most certainly better than her efforts. While she spoke Russian fluently, her accent was poor, as it was in any of the languages she spoke. Come to think of it, even her English was accented, although with what she had no idea . . .

It was the probable result of having no native tongue. Asked to pick one, she would have chosen English, but she had learned that language from her Scottish father, Lockie. It had taken a few years of English and international schools to prune the burr down.

Stevie’s real mother-tongue was a mixture of Italian, French and Farsi—her grandmother Didi had spent her childhood in Persia and she passed to Stevie the childhood songs and games and stories that had stayed with her. For much of her childhood, Stevie thought it was all one language.

She spoke Italian with a French accent, Farsi with an Italian one, and French with a Persian twang. Her English was faintly Scottish. German and Swiss German came from growing up in Switzerland; Spanish she’d picked up along the way. She had studied Russian at Oxford. These three languages she spoke with an English accent. Nowhere in the world, as fluent as her sentences were, would Stevie have passed as a native.

‘An honour? Surely not.’ Valery Kozkov took tea from his automatic wife and was now sitting beside her, directly opposite Stevie.

‘It takes enormous courage to do what you are doing.’ Stevie wanted to get to the point fast, leave as little room for false premises as possible. ‘You have put yourself in a very dangerous position.’

‘In Russia today we live with illegal advantage,’ he began softly. ‘It is easier and more profitable to ignore the rules than to abide by them. Illegality is the norm, legality the unaffordable luxury for most people. It is this equation that I am trying to change. When breaking the law becomes too risky and expensive, people will naturally begin to live by it. Confidence will return. That is what I work for.’

A tall boy, about eighteen, blond and wax-pale, appeared in the doorway. He stared at Stevie. His big, blue eyes were not as dark as his mother’s but Stevie recognised the Kozkovs’ son from the birch-wood photo. He had changed much since then. Framed by the dark hallway he could almost have been a ghost. Kozkov turned his head, sensing him.

‘Vadim!’ The boy shifted his eyes to his father.

‘What fine speeches you make, father. What principles you have. If only you could be such a strong hero for your family.’ Vadim’s voice was quiet, hoarse, bitter. Not at all the voice Stevie had expected would come from a man so young. It surprised her.

‘Come and sit with us, Vadim,’ his father urged. But the boy vanished back into the hall. Irina got up and slowly went after him, the tap of her heels fading into the darkness.

The music had stopped and the loud ticking clock took over. Kozkov seemed lost in thoughts that were taking him far from the sitting room. Stevie shot a questioning look at Henning but he avoided her eyes.

The clock struck nine. Nobody seemed about to move and Stevie was crumbling with hunger. She began to assess what she had seen of the Kozkov family’s situation so far: There was a passivity in the house, a frozen silence, that
was all wrong. The room held the world’s biggest elephant and no one wanted to mention it.

Usually, one of the biggest hurdles Stevie faced was getting a new client to accept that real danger existed—at least until something frightening happened to them. By signing a contract with Hazard Limited, they were getting themselves over that first difficult psychological barrier.

Kozkov’s position at the bank entitled him to armed protection twenty-four hours a day, paid for by the state. This would have included being chauffeured everywhere in an armour-plated limousine, and being shadowed by bodyguards. From her readings about him, Stevie knew he refused these offers, always had. He moved about with only an unarmed driver. But Kozkov was aware of the dangers. They had escalated recently due specifically to his tough new stance with the Russian banks over money laundering.

Stevie remembered his sudden public announcement. It had had the clarity of purpose of someone who actually plans to do something: banks were very important to the economy, he’d explained. People needed to be confident that their money was in safe hands or it would remain wedged firmly under the bed. No confidence meant fear, and fear meant a lack of investment. The banks had to operate transparently; the money laundering would have to stop.

Money laundering is all about concealing the source of illegally earned cash—washing dirty money—and there are many ways to do it. One way is to set up shell companies that channel tainted cash through legitimate, high-cash operations, and then back to the first owner, therefore hiding where the original money came from, rendering it effectively clean.

While banks did not always know they were laundering money, in the past many had turned a blind eye to funds they knew to be dirty.

In the UK, the Proceeds of Crime Act had been designed to stop this; in the US, it was the Money Laundering Act. Kozkov was trying to bring the same degree of scrutiny and severity to a far more lawless banking environment.

He started out by imposing crippling fines on all banks caught laundering money, and then by seizing any profits made from the illegal money. While this was a very public statement that laundering was not acceptable behaviour, the banks kept operating, the paper trails too well obscured. So Kozkov began to shut any bank caught acting illegally, but still the banks refused to die. They just popped up under different names. He then decreed that anyone caught laundering money would be banned from the banking industry for life.

His enemies therefore were now: all the banks, and anyone who had ever profited, or intended to profit, from the laundering of money through them. The list was a driftnet of the powerful, including senior members of the Russian government.

Stevie had puzzled over why his nomination was approved in the first place—but then no one in power had known he would go after the banks so hard.

In 1998, Russia faced a financial crisis. The International Monetary Fund agreed to lend the country money only on the condition that Russia establish an independent central bank. Kozkov had been the IMF’s preferred candidate and he was subsequently appointed Head of the Central Bank. He spent his time poring through the accounts, combing through the tangles, talking to people. As he bothered no one, no one thought to replace him with someone more malleable. Then one day he emerged suddenly from the concrete chrysalis of his office and announced that everything was going to change—and it did.

The point was that Kozkov therefore was not a man to be suddenly seized by panic. He and his family had lived with a certain level of threat since his appointment, a good ten years ago. So what was going on? What were Henning and the family not telling her?

A plan involving some kind of action was needed fast because a) Stevie was starving and b) her curiosity—always a vulnerable point—was driving her wild. You’re good, Henning. I will give you that. You’re good, getting me hooked in like this. But don’t think you are going to get away with a thing.

Kozkov shook his head and spoke. ‘I’m sorry. I am a terrible host.

You must be hungry after your trip. We don’t have much, our cook had to leave us suddenly. But perhaps you would eat an omelette?’

Stevie smiled. ‘I would like that very much. Let me help.’ She wondered if they had got rid of the cook as a security precaution. Staff were a vulnerability. She followed Valery into the kitchen. Irina was already there.

The Kozkov kitchen cupboards were rather bare. It looked as if little more than tea had been made for days. Everything was exceptionally clean, Stevie noticed; probably Irina in a fit of nervous mania.

In the simple kitchen, working on the scrubbed wooden table that stood in the centre of the black-and-white tiled floor, Irina handed Stevie eggs, one by one, and Stevie broke them into a large ceramic bowl. There were nine eggs
—just enough. They would be six people if the daughter was home. Irina watched her work, eyes like a sleepwalker.

Stevie decided she had better take over the cooking.

She asked for directions to a frying pan, a wooden spatula, a bread knife. Irina answered in careful, soft monosyllables, as if she were afraid of her own voice. But at least she was speaking.

Irina went to the window and drew back the curtains. In Russia, the windows have two panes, to keep out the cold. By opening the inside pane, you can get a little fresh air without inviting in the arctic temperatures outside. There is also a space between the panes—a ledge—that is used as a cool box in winter. Irina opened the inside window and pulled out a bottle of vodka, completely chilled. She poured two glasses and gave one to Stevie.

‘*Na*zar*o*vy*e.*’ Cheers.

She would get good value from vodka on a desperately empty stomach.

Behind Stevie, Irina was setting the table. She had poured two more glasses of vodka. As Stevie set down her second empty glass—now feeling rather warm inside—she counted the plates.

‘Is your daughter not joining us for dinner?’

This was not, apparently, the right thing to ask. Irina mutely shook her head. She sat down at the kitchen table and began to weep.

So *that’s* it. *The daughter.*

Stevie turned back to the frying pan.

Kozkov, Vadim and Henning walked in; Kozkov laid a hand on his wife’s bent shoulders and kept it there. No one mentioned the weeping.

‘You haven’t been introduced to my son, Vadim,’ Kozkov said, gesturing for Vadim to offer Stevie a greeting. They shook hands.

Up close, Vadim was even more ghostly. His hair and skin were almost the same colour; even his eyebrows and eyelashes were blond. It was as if the boy had been completely drained of pigment.

Stevie had read that loss of pigmentation was a common side effect of being hit by lightning, but surely . . . A long scar over his eye—badly stitched at the time—made violence of that sort seem almost possible. She served the omelette, hot and soft and buttery, then watched Vadim pour the vodka into every glass. His voice, his scar, his pallor made her wonder whether he were a boy at all and not some weary old man.

‘*Na*zar*o*vy*e,*’ said Kozkov, eyes on his son.

Stevie took a breath. ‘Where is your daughter tonight?’

Vadim refilled the glasses. ‘To Anya,’ he whispered.

‘Our daughter Anya is missing.’ It was Irina who spoke, as if her daughter’s name had jolted her from her torpor. Stevie shot a glance at Henning who still refused to meet her gaze.

‘What happened?’

Irina took a quick breath and the words poured out in sharp bursts.

‘She went to GUM, the department store, with her friend Petra, to do some shopping. They went to a café. Petra went to pay for coffee at the counter. There was a line and she had to wait a while. When she came back, the table was empty and Anya was gone. No one has heard anything from her since.’

‘When was this?’ Stevie asked quickly.

‘Four and a half days now.’

Too long. Far too long.

‘And you’ve asked Petra—’ ‘Of course.’

‘How old is Anya?’

‘She’s fifteen.’

‘And you’ve spoken to Anya’s school teachers?’

‘Her physics teacher suggested she might have run away to America with a secret boyfriend.’ Irina blinked twice. ‘Her teachers live in a world that has long gone. They don’t understand.’

‘This is the new Russia—the era of the Novi Ruski.’ Kozkov’s voice had a bitter edge. ‘Sudden unexplained absences are seldom voluntary.’

‘So you think she has been kidnapped?’ Stevie was dreading the answer.
Kozkov nodded. ‘But there has been no word, no ransom demand. Nothing.’

‘Have you told anyone, the police?’ Stevie asked, although she feared she knew the answer. ‘It’s been four and a half days—’

‘It is too risky. We didn’t know what to do. The security forces, the police could be cooperating with whoever took her.’ Kozkov was now pacing the kitchen. He stopped to light a cigarette, his hands shaking. ‘The list of suspects is so long: criminals, corrupt officials, even members of Russia’s Federal Security Service. Information in Moscow is about as watertight as a colander. Even if the officials weren’t involved, they would likely just mess it up and get Anya . . .’

‘So my father has decided to do nothing—to sit and wait for them to come to us,’ Vadim cut in. Kozkov tried to put his hand on Vadim’s arm but he pulled away violently. ‘You sacrificed me, and now Anya!’

‘Vadim, you are angry at the wrong person. If you have to be angry, be angry at a system, a government, so corrupted that this can be allowed to happen. If I had done anything, the slightest untoward thing, my enemies would have crucified me.’

‘It’s alright for you to have your principles,’ Vadim’s voice shook with fury. ‘You work from your nice safe office. You’re too important to kill. But we pay the price. And now you won’t lean on your connections to find her.’

‘I don’t know who has taken her, Vadim.’ Kozkov closed his eyes. ‘My connections could be involved for all we know.’

‘Don’t tell me there is anything that cannot be bought in Russia—’ Vadim rose in frustration ‘—except of course you,’ he spat over his shoulder as he left the kitchen.

‘This is why I thought of you, Stevie,’ Henning said. ‘You’re presence is unlikely to provoke anyone who may be watching the Kozkovs.

You could be a family friend.’

‘I could certainly put you in touch with the specialists at Hazard.

They could send a team—’ ‘We can’t risk the provocation,’ Henning interrupted. ‘We need a woman—delicate and unnoticeable and competent. We need you.’

A crashing sound came from along the corridor and Henning went out to look for Vadim. Irina began to wash the few dishes.

‘Irina, tell me about Anya. What is she like?’ Stevie was most careful to use the present tense. Meanwhile her mind was spinning in tumult.

‘She is a very beautiful girl. She plays violin at the conservatorium most afternoons. She’s very bright, a good girl, good at school. Vadim and Anya are so close. They are almost like twins. That’s why he’s so angry.’

Stevie wasn’t so sure that was the whole story. ‘What did Vadim mean when he said he’d been sacrificed, and now Anya?’

Irina glanced towards her husband but he was gone. With that, she withdrew back into herself.

**During a Moscow winter, it** is an adventure just to leave the house. Tonight, the thermometer, fixed to the wall in the vodka gap between the kitchen windows, read –30 degrees. At these temperatures, the air actually hurts. It’s difficult to breathe. Exposed skin burns. But you don’t get shivery cold, like on a chilly day; the cold feels hard, it stings, like bees and breaking plates.

It was into this night that Stevie insisted on walking home from the Kozkovs’, which meant that Henning would have to accompany her. It was not possible for a woman to stroll alone on the streets at night. Stevie wanted to get Henning by himself, and for longer than the short car ride to the hotel. She also needed air after the suffocating dinner.

Stevie and Henning made their way through the layer-cake of steel doors. When they opened the final door and stepped into the white street, they both gasped quietly with the shock of the cold.

The boulevard was bright, the waist-high snow reflecting the greenish light of the street lamps. Not a soul was out walking and the vast expanse was deserted. It made Stevie think of Dante, the medieval Italian poet who had portrayed the circles of hell, and she remembered that the deepest, darkest circle of the inferno—where the devil himself lives—is not a fiery furnace but a frozen lake. In the depths of the ninth circle, the villains are coated in ice,
trapped ‘like straw in glass’. Everything is still and silent. There, Dante’s pilgrim meets the treacherous— those who have betrayed the bonds of love and trust; those who have betrayed their homeland; further down, those who have betrayed friends or guests. At the very bottom he finds Judas Iscariot.

Stevie took Henning’s arm lest she slip on ice. ‘Henning, why didn’t you tell me it was a missing persons case?’

‘Anya has been kidnapped, Stevie.’ Henning spoke slowly. ‘I don’t think there can be any doubt that she is not missing of her own free will.’

‘There’s been no communication to that effect yet.’

‘That doesn’t mean—’ ‘No. No it doesn’t.’ Stevie tightened her grip on his arm. ‘I’m just playing devil’s advocate. The police will tell you teenagers run away. I believe the family. Still, you should have told me before I left London.’

Henning kept his gaze fixed on the slippery white path ahead.

‘You wouldn’t have come, would you?’

‘I can’t hunt for Anya.’ Stevie searched Henning’s face for understanding, but his strong profile betrayed nothing. ‘I’m not a private investigator. You know that, Henning. No matter how hard you try to seduce me with that poor family’s pain. These are not decisions that can be made emotionally. Too much is at stake.’

Henning stopped walking and looked down at her. ‘There is too much at stake to do nothing, Stevie. You have the chance to make all the difference in the world.’

Stevie looked away, uncomfortable. Her words tumbled out quickly, almost automatically. ‘Kozkov needs to hire a “Kidnap and Ransom” team with a trained negotiator. I am not trained to negotiate and I can’t take that risk for Anya. I can recommend a really good guy— got those Italian engineers back alive when their tanker was seized by Somali pirates. He’s done kids, too, does lots of work in the Balkans and Russia.’

Henning shook his head. ‘A negotiator with a team is not an option. There’s been no contact, no ransom demand. Stevie, I’m afraid that whoever took Anya wants more than Kozkov’s money. They want his integrity. They want to take his soul. They may never give Anya back.’

‘Why not just kill her then?’ The white puffs of smoke that accompanied Stevie’s words refused to evaporate into the ether. She regretted saying that out loud.

They walked on in silence. Perhaps it was the cold that was making her ears ring so painfully.

‘I’m sorry, Henning. I didn’t mean to sound harsh. But this is out of my league. I’m not that girl, the heroine who makes a stand. I am very human and I get scared like anyone else. Anya needs the best. If I mess it up, she dies.’

‘I convinced Kozkov to have faith in you, that it was the only way.’

Stevie stopped. ‘But why?’

‘Because I have faith in you.’ He said it as simply as a marriage vow: I, Henning, have faith in you, Stevie Margaret Duveen, as if having that sort of faith in another person was something straightforward. Stevie knew it was not. That pledge was, to her, the most devastating compliment.

They wandered on down the lonely boulevard, past the metal doors, the stone doorways, the beautiful pale green domes of St Vladimir’s Church, tucked like pear blossoms between brutal Soviet towers.

‘What is it exactly you think I can do for them?’ Stevie asked carefully, having regained her composure.

‘Be there to help guide the Kozkovs through these bad days, help them know what to expect; find out as much as you can about what happened and who might have taken Anya—anything that might help.’ Henning paused. ‘Then be there when the kidnappers call.’

They passed by a casino kiosk. There are lots of these in Moscow, dotted about near metro stations. They look like newstands, small white cabins brightly painted with gambling chips and bouquets of hearts in revolutionary red. Standing in the street, pedestrians can lean through the barred window and place a bet on a roulette wheel any time of the day or night.

As if anyone ever found love by gambling, thought Stevie, looking at the hearts. Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe the only way to find love is to gamble . . .

Hearts and arrows and Cyrillic letters blinked and flashed in hot neon, dancing on the snow, on Stevie, on Henning, like a shower of fireworks.

He turned to her. ‘You told me in London that you were protecting the wrong people. Well, these are the right people.’
‘Henning, I can’t do it. I’m sorry.’

Stevie peered into the casino window. A tired old babushka sat wrapped in so many layers she could have been a caterpillar. A roulette wheel spun idly in front of her, the little white ball making a joyless clicking every time it leaped numbers.

‘Do you remember the girls on the park bench you saw that day I called you? They were haunting you.’

The ball finally settled on 8 and was still.

‘Think of Anya as a girl on a park bench. Only this time, Stevie, don’t walk away.’

Stevie looked at Henning’s flickering face, his serious eyes, his kind mouth. Bastard. He was trying to hold her to her principles.

‘That’s a cheap trick.’

‘Is it, Stevie? You didn’t mean those things you said? You don’t care what happens?’ he challenged.

She snapped. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, Henning. Of course I care. But you can’t go around caring about every single horror story in the world.

‘No. It doesn’t. But you should have compassion for the people who cross your life, however briefly. Those are the ones you can help, the ones you can touch.’

Of course he was right. Stevie knew that. But doing wasn’t the same as wanting to do. It was infinitely more troublesome. And dangerous. Tonight was the third time in two days that she had felt like a coward. There was a desperate family, a girl in mortal danger, and she was thinking of herself.

‘Just until the kidnappers make contact, Stevie,’ Henning pleaded softly. ‘When contact is made, we’ll get your negotiator in. I promise.’

Stevie just shook her head. She and Henning stood transfixed as the babushka dropped the ball and spun the wheel.

‘What’s your number at roulette?’ Henning spoke without moving his eyes from the wheel.

‘Thirteen.’

*If that little roulette ball lands on thirteen, Stevie thought, I’m in. If it lands on any other number, I go home tomorrow and practise being brave somewhere else.*

‘You should have made a bet, Stevie.’ Henning gestured with his hand in the pocket of his coat. The ball lay cradled in number thirteen.
‘It will be enough to tell them she is still alive.’

A rough hand reached down and ripped Anya’s thin gold chain from her neck. From it hung an orthodox crucifix and a small evil eye made of blue glass.

She was still alive, but for how much longer?

Everything she could do to make her situation better, she had done. But that was not much. The blindfold had not once been removed. Only her ears and nose and touch told her she wasn’t alone, that there were people around, that she was still in Russia, that her captors enjoyed the radio, that they ate a lot of boiled meat and argued frequently.

The radio helped her play the mental games she knew would keep her sharp. The security coordinator at her father’s bank had once told her about kidnappings, emphasised the importance of the role of the kidnapping victim in securing their own freedom. It was important, he had drummed into her, to do mental exercises if imprisoned. In the event that an opportunity came to escape, or that someone mounted a rescue attempt, she would have to be quick and lucid enough to respond properly. Blindfolded, she couldn’t read, so anticipating the next song was a game she played with herself, and memorising the words to songs and the weather forecasts was another.

Being blindfolded somehow made her feel braver than she might have felt if she had been able to see her captors’ faces. Initially it had been terrifying to be plunged into darkness but now it had become a comfort.

When she knew or suspected someone was near her, she would begin to talk out loud and tell stories about her life, especially her childhood. It would, she hoped, help humanise her to the kidnappers. If they saw her as a human being rather than an object to be traded or used, they might be less likely to kill her. They might treat her better, or hesitate at the critical moment. The smallest thing could help.

All the while, though, Anya was careful to preserve the anonymity of the captors. She asked no questions that might cause them to reveal who they were. This would not help her escape and it might make them kill her if they thought she could identify them later. So, in a way, she was grateful for the blindfold.

Sometimes, during the arguments, she could make out words—there seemed to be a man and a woman. She heard the woman call the man an idiot once. ‘Valery Kozkov is not rich,’ she had screamed. Anya hoped the kidnappers wouldn’t ask for too much money. The woman was right. Her father wasn’t rich, not like the oligarchs. Anya thought she had better not say that though. In case they got angry.

She tried to think practically, to tell herself she was coping well, to swallow the terror she felt. Her determination had got her into this mess; she hoped it would be enough to get her out.

Only ever when she was in Russia did Stevie have caviar for breakfast. A soft-boiled egg filled with the grey roe, slithers of thin black toast on the side, was the consolation for much that was difficult in Moscow.

When she had arrived back at the Metropole the night before, she had called Hazard and explained the situation to Betterman in K&R. Constantine Dinov, the negotiator, was on stand-by to fly in. She would do an ongoing assessment in the meantime so that Dinov would have as much information as possible on the family, the political situation on the ground, and the kidnappers—if possible—for when the time came to deal. Every little bit could help.

Stevie only hoped David Rice didn’t hear of it. In any case, she was on leave. There was nothing to say.

She poured herself a second cup of boiling black coffee and shook out the papers.

Izvestia was full of news on energy, particularly the new Baku—Tbliisi—Ceyhan pipeline that stretched from Azerbaijan to Turkey through Georgia. Armed guards were to be stationed every three metres to protect the underground pipeline from rebels threatening to blow it up as it passed through the Southern Caucasus.

There was also news of battles with the Chechens that seemed to have been going on forever. Stevie remembered seeing the Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev announce on television that he had hidden a ‘dirty bomb’—a canister full of cesium—somewhere in Moscow.

A ‘dirty bomb’ was a regular explosive, such as dynamite, mixed with radiological pellets or powder. Cesium was a radioactive substance that could, in certain isotopes, be produced by atomic energy plants as waste. The explosion was designed to disperse radiological dust as far as possible.

Rather than cause mass casualties, like an atomic bomb, only those very close to the explosion would likely be killed. The radiation, however, was harmful to health, and would contaminate a large part of Moscow for a very long time. The main effect therefore would be mass panic, and a loss of any confidence that citizens had in the Russian government’s ability to protect them.
Basayev had directed a television crew to Izmailovsky Park, where the device was found buried at the entrance, just as the rebel leader had described. The bomb was never detonated but the message had been heard loud and clear in the Kremlin: ‘We can reach right into your capital city, and we can do it with dirty bombs. No one is safe.’

Even without detonation, the legitimacy of the politburo had taken a heavy blow. Four years later, under a new president, a second war was started in Chechnya, fought mainly by ill-equipped conscripts who were often more in danger of being bullied to death by their officers than being shot by enemy fighters. Since then, the Chechens no longer called in their bomb threats but just carried them out.

On 24 October 2002, terrorists took over the Dubrovka theatre during a performance. The audience initially thought the fighters in fatigues and the women in black burqas—the Black Widows—were all part of the show. Until they showed their bodies, strapped with explosives. At least 129 hostages died after a bungled raid in which the Federal Security Service—the FSB—bombed the theatre with poisonous gas.

Less than a year later, two suicide bombers—both women—blew themselves up in the middle of a rock concert at the Tushino Airport in Moscow.

Then Beslan, on 1 September 2004. That day at School Number One haunts all Russians still: the terrified children, the faces of the parents watching the siege, the shootings . . . 186 children died that day.

Russia was still angry about Beslan, angry at the men who had murdered their children, angry at the security forces who had bungled the raid to save them, and angry at the Russian government who had expended so much blood and treasure in Chechnya, to ‘keep them safe from the terrorists’ only to sustain the worst attack yet. And so young men were still being sent to wallow in icy mud and set off explosives and shoot at other young men who lived in bleak, rain-scoured villages. For both sides life was brutish.

A deep voice jolted her from her unpleasant reverie.

‘Good morning.’ Into the breakfast room strolled the unmistakable Henning. He was rather gloriously dressed in a pale blue shirt, navy woollen trousers and a cardigan in deep purple. A blue tie with pale pink dots was perfectly knotted at his throat.

Stevie poured him a cup of coffee and he leaned forward in his chair, revealing a flash of red sock.

‘Is it simply icy out there?’ she asked. ‘The papers are saying –40 degrees. Those sorts of temperatures are absurd. It’s all over Europe, too: the birds are stuck frozen on telephone wires in Paris, and the metal axles of trucks are snapping in Berlin.’

Stevie had dressed in a dove-grey cashmere jumper and cream moleskin trousers. Knee-high riding boots and thick woollen socks would at least keep the bottom half of her legs warm.

She handed Henning the cup. ‘I keep thinking about the poor birds with their tiny cold wings.’

Henning took a sip of his coffee and put his cup down. ‘Stevie, Kozkov found something in his mailbox this morning.’

She sat up at once. ‘From the kidnappers?’

‘He thinks so. It’s Anya’s gold chain. It was just lying there when he checked, on the way to work.’

‘And it had definitely not been there before?’

‘Definitely. Irina collected the mail yesterday, she does it four or five times a day now, waiting for news of Anya.’

Stevie folded the papers and pushed them aside, thinking. ‘It sounds like a prelude to some sort of communication. Hopefully this means they’ll contact Kozkov soon with a ransom demand.’

‘Do you really think they want money?’ Henning’s eyebrow hung, suspended with doubt.

‘It’s by far the most common motive for kidnapping the world over,’ she reasoned.

‘Kozkov is not a very rich man. There are so many others far richer.’

‘Maybe.’ Stevie took a quick sip of her coffee. ‘But the oligarchs and their children have lots of security—every big businessman in Moscow travels with bodyguards slinging AK—47s in armour-plated 4WDs with flashing blue lights and bulletproof tyres. Kozkov doesn’t. It makes him a soft target.’

‘Could be amateurs . . .’

‘Possibly, although it takes nerve to hang on this long without communicating.’

‘If they are amateurs, it might be easier to get her back.’ Henning frowned. ‘It could be a positive thing.’

Stevie said nothing. Amateurs were far more inclined to panic than professionals. That was how victims got
killed.

She thought for a moment then said, ‘I think Anya’s kidnappers are waiting because they know it’s the best way to weaken Kozkov. He has a reputation for fearless incorruptibility, remember? I have a feeling they plan to demand the world from him.’

Henning looked straight at Stevie, his eyes as steady and serious as steel rails. ‘Then let’s hope to God Kozkov is in a position to give it to them.’

**Irina held Anya’s necklace** through her fingers like cat’s cradle.

‘I want to hold her so much.’ Her voice was a whisper, her eyes pink and watery. Vadim stood by his mother’s side.

‘She never took it off. The cross was her godmother’s, Katia. She drowned when she fell though the ice one spring.’

Stevie carefully took the necklace from Irina and examined it. ‘It was ripped from her neck, I’m guessing. The clasp is a little bent. Gold is soft.’ She looked closely at the blue glass eye that twisted slowly this way and that.

‘People usually wear an evil eye to keep people’s bad thoughts away,’ Stevie said, half to herself.

‘The eye was a new thing,’ Vadim broke in. ‘I think it’s from a night club—like a membership badge or a promotion.’

‘It’s quite beautiful. What is the club called?’

‘Zima. These promoters run a new club named after each season: 
- **Zima** in winter, 
- **Leto** in summer, 
- **Vesna** in spring and 
- **Osen** in autumn.

People in Moscow have very short attention spans. The nightclubs have to reinvent themselves every few months.’

‘Does Anya go to nightclubs often?’ Stevie was surprised. She was only fifteen.

‘It was her first time,’ Vadim said. ‘They run some model night there. Girls go to get discovered. She went to the club two nights before she disappeared. I remember. She told me afterwards or I would have stopped her.’

‘I didn’t know.’ Irina shook her head. ‘Anya likes classical music.’

‘Irina,’ Stevie asked gently, ‘can I see Anya’s room?’

**It was a comfortable room**, a teenage room, with photos of her school friends, animals, a Coldplay poster, one of Vanessa Mae, signed. The single bed, neatly made with a pale pink quilt, reminded Stevie how young Anya was; and how horribly afraid she would be feeling right at this moment.

‘Was Anya happy? Did she mention any new friends, ideas, places in the last few weeks?’ she asked Irina.

It was Vadim who answered. ‘She always talks about moving to America, or Paris. Living real life. She wants to be famous.’

‘I don’t suppose she keeps a diary?’

‘No. She expresses everything through music. She always says words deform true meaning.’

Anya had papered the entire wall next to her bed with the covers of fashion magazines. Sandy Belle was on several of them. Her face stared down at Stevie, with her perky nose and flaming hair. Stevie wondered what dreams Sandy Belle had inspired in Anya.

‘Did Anya want to be an actress?’

Vadim looked at his mother. She was far away, staring out the window at the white winter fog.

‘A model. But my parents thought it was a bad idea.’

‘She is too young.’ Irina woke from her reverie. ‘It’s not a nice world for her. She doesn’t need to do that. Modelling here is for girls who have no choices.’

Anya’s music stand stood by the window like a lone winter tree.

A violin case sat at the foot of the bed. Irina went over to the stand and started turning the pages of Anya’s sheet music.

‘She loves Tchaikovsky, and Shostakovich. She stands by the window here and plays over the people rushing below. Her godfather, Kirril, used to say that you could never be a truly great violinist until you experienced pure sorrow and pure joy. He said it changes the quality of the notes you play forever. Anya believed that, too.’
Stevie knelt and opened the violin case, took out the elegant instrument. ‘Is she close to her godfather?’

‘She was once. He’s a conductor and he introduced Anya to music.

Neither Valery nor I are musical.’ Irina gave a wry smile. ‘When she was younger, they would listen to music together and talk about it for hours.’

‘Where is he now?’

Irina shook her head. ‘It has been years since any of us spoke to him. He no longer lives in Russia.’ She seemed about to say more but then just bowed her head and reached for the edge of the pink coverlet.

Stevie suddenly felt like an impostor. ‘Irina, Henning tells me your husband doesn’t want to hire anyone local to help.’

Irina shook her head. ‘It’s too dangerous. Everyone is corrupt.’

‘But when we start to negotiate, you need a trained professional. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’

Stevie replaced the violin with great care and closed the case. ‘I can recommend a man. His name is Constantine Dinov. He has done this many times before. In the meantime, I’m going to try to find out as much as I can about Anya and what happened so we can help Constantine get her back safely. That’s all the help I can offer, I’m sorry.’

Vadim glanced at his mother, then Stevie. ‘Just by agreeing to try, you are helping,’ he said. ‘You give us hope. Without hope you can’t live.’

Stevie bit her lip. ‘We need to go to that nightclub, Vadim. Tonight.’

In the night world of Moscow the real New Russia is revealed. The winter’s day is short and unconfident. It exists to provide gaps between nights. Daylight is the only sense of order that survives here. The night world is created and inhabited by the night people. These are the thrillseekers, the young, the very newly very rich, and those who serve them. They have been partying apocalyptically since 1993, when the Soviet Union deflated and all things changed beyond recognition.

The early years of freedom brought violence to the streets, assassinations, chaos; it injected energy into the existing desperation, celebratory hysteria, the uncertainty of utter hedonism. It created oligarchs and über criminals and vampire beauties to feed off them. Mostly the age was characterised by a complete lack of restraint. These qualities have remained intact.

Every traveller into the underworld needs a guide. As Dante had Virgil, so Stevie called on her two Italian friends, Diego and Iacopo.

She had met them on her first trip to Moscow and they could always be relied upon to find the best restaurant and the hiffest club. Being Italian, they refused to adapt one iota to Russian ways and remained resolutely as they were. Even their tans stayed mysteriously summerish, as though Capri was just around the corner. Their cultural confidence was the root of their charm.

The restaurant Diego and Iacopo chose was called Sushi Fusion.

Henning was under strict instructions to remember anything of interest in the event Stevie got a little too drunk—which she wouldn’t—and not to leave her side. Bathroom breaks were excepted.

Back at the Metropole she had a raging hot bath and emerged bright pink and steaming. Moisturiser—Louis Widmer, because she liked the pink bottle and it smelt of her childhood—massaged into the body, was vital in very cold weather, in heated rooms, or you risked drying out like a twig. Scent, always applied when naked, a very little on the neck and the wrists. Her grandmother, who knew everything, said it should only be detectable when you were being kissed—‘hello’ that is, of course.

Hurry. Dress. You don’t want Henning ringing up from the lobby while you are still naked.

Obeying her inner nanny, she layered carefully in her Hanro thermals. The Swiss made the best undergarments. These were a wool-silk mix, very fine, and her heavenly Didi swore by them. Then a midnight blue rollneck jumper in medium-weight cashmere, pearls on the outside; a cream woollen skirt, pressed invincibly into tiny pleats that opened like a Japanese fan. It was uncrushable and fabulous for dancing; tight black knee-high boots with a flat heel (you never knew what you might have to run from in a strange city at night; plus there was black ice); her trusty crocodile bag.

Henning stood like a Christmas tree in the middle of the lobby in his herringbone coat, a flat woollen cap, a white silk scarf knotted tightly at his throat and a smile for Stevie.

‘What are you so happy about? This is a work mission.’
'You look tremendous.'
Stevie frowned. ‘Thank you but that isn’t the idea. I’m blending in. Where’s Vadim?’

‘Buying cigarettes. There.’ Vadim strolled into the lobby. He would be essential for pointing out Petra, and anyone else Anya might have got close to. A brother’s questions were also less suspicious than a stranger’s.

With Moscow restaurants, one never quite knows what to expect. Sushi Fusion was painted a lacquer black, the ceilings red, like an enormous bento box. A bar dimly lit ran the length of one wall. As the three of them disrobed in the entrance and handed in their coats, a family with two young children was being seated.

Sweet, thought Stevie, a little family evening in such a mad city.

She sometimes forgot children existed in Moscow. She so rarely saw any.

Four go-go dancers were gyrating on the bar in feather bikinis, sequined hotpants and over-the-knee boots. Three had long blonde hair that they flicked about like whips with a crack of their necks. A fourth had short dark hair and a severe mouth.

It was an odd combination: family restaurant (Stevie added a couple of grandmothers at a far table to the children) and erotic dance bar. But, she supposed, these were Moscow rules: anything goes.

Sitting at their table, Stevie watched the dancers. It was the hips and breasts that moved, not the feet. That’s how they could dance without falling off. The girls had incredible bodies but no one else in the room appeared to be watching with any interest—not the two children, not Vadim.

He smoked and stared at his glass of rum and coke. The cold air outside had angered the scar over his eye; it stood out livid in his pale face. Stevie wanted to ask what had happened but now was not the time.

Iacopo and Diego arrived with a burst of energy. Iacopo launched into a ridiculous tale of a recent trip to Kazakhstan, involving deep fog, a frozen Kazakh forest and a skidoo running out of petrol. He and Diego worked for a large Italian company that distributed ceramic products all over the former Soviet Union. Basically, their job was to go to the ends of the earth and sell toilet bowls. A sense of humour was vital to the work.

The two spoke absolutely no Russian. They would just speak Italian, gesture as they would among friends, and they made themselves perfectly understood—most of the time.

As she suspected, Diego and Iacopo knew everything there was to know about the model competition run by Zima.

‘Every month they do big promotion night.’ Diego spoke in his waterfall English for Vadim’s benefit. ‘It bring all the girls from everywhere who want to be a model—Almaty, San Pietroburgo, Nizny Novgorod—’

‘And all the men to see them. It is always so full model night,’ Iacopo added.

‘They take a spotlight. They have these guys who look at the faces—’

‘—All the girl dancing, laughing—’

‘—and they pick them. They put the spotlight like this,’ Diego made a startled face, the girl caught by the light, ‘and they take pictures and the girls go up on palco scenico—’

‘—the stage. They do the walking, then they pick the ten best girls. Everyone is taking pictures for promotion.’

‘Then they pick the winning girl, the most beautiful.’

‘What does the girl win?’ Stevie took a sip of her warm sake.

‘She goes with Top Faces agency to New York.’ Iacopo took charge of the sake bottle and refilled everyone’s cups. ‘They have an agent here.

He goes to the club to choose the girls.’

‘The girls are desperate to win. They are very beautiful—il viso della Madonna—the face of a Madonna—but no expression. So cold.’ Diego shivered theatrically. ‘They are good for looking.’

‘Do they keep pictures of the girls anywhere?’

‘Ah sì. They have a big wall in the VIP room, all the photos of the girls.’

‘So,’ Stevie downed her sake and smiled. ‘When are we going?’

The crowd outside Zima was huge, a bustling black mass. To get from the car to the entrance, they had to trudge along a wide alleyway of trees, through knee-deep snow. It would not do for the face control—as bouncers are called in Moscow—to see them arrive in their shoddy car. Fortunately Diego and Iacopo had made quite an impression on the head face control (their company employed his sister) and a wait in the freezing night was
averted.

Security guards were as thick as a wood inside. Between general drunkenness, organised crime, disorganised crime, and the threat of Chechen rebels, the possibility for mayhem was big. Stevie’s handbag was searched; they passed through metal detectors; no one even considered smiling.

They walked through the heavy felt curtains that kept out the cold and into the club. The space was enormous. The ceiling was five storeys high and four galleries ran along the edges of the room, stepping up to the vaulted ceiling. They were all packed with people, their faces tiny with distance.

Heavy house music pumped through the space. Just to the right of the entrance was a round bed covered in velvet cushions and vaguely veiled by white gauze curtains. On it, four semi-naked girls were romping—romping wasn’t quite the right word . . . it suggested a little too much innocence, a little too much joy . . .

The girls were ‘playing’ very well, rehearsed, with perfect moves drawing eyes to perfect bottoms, perfect breasts, perfectly blank faces on which an audience could project their desires.

Stevie stopped to watch. Men surrounded the round bed, staring. Mostly their expressions were dispassionate, the flames of their fantasy hidden deep enough not to show on their faces. One man, a good-looking guy, young and eager, moved forward to the front of the circle and was drawn in by the nymphs. He rolled about with the girls, taking pleasure from their bodies and from being the envy of the watching men.

Pleasure strips you naked as much as pain. The young stud—Stevie saw it in his face—suddenly realised that he had become part of the show. He became uncomfortable and pulled himself quickly away, out of the circle.

Scanning the faces, Stevie noticed one man, chubby and pale. His desire was right there in his face, on his mouth, his shiny lips. He was videotaping the girls, right up close. He stuck out his tongue—too far, too fat, too pink—in appreciation.

The tongue, his open lust, made Stevie feel a little sick. She had seen dancers and strippers before. It wasn’t that. But this man’s desire and his arrogance were more naked than the bodies of the writhing girls. She had to turn away, plunge deeper into the crowd. It was time to find some answers.

Vadim drew her to a bar. Young girls in tiny tight jeans, little singlets, designer handbags and skeleton heels, were clustered about. Stevie pulled the photo of Vadim’s sister from her handbag. It was a copy of the two of them in front of the birch wood.

The girls stared at Stevie blankly when she spoke to them. They didn’t smile, didn’t reply. They were not interested in Stevie nor what she wanted. She was not a Russian man flush with cash.

The girls didn’t recognise Anya from the photo—but then, they probably wouldn’t. She looked natural, young, on a summer holiday. They might have met her here, in a dark club. She would have been wearing makeup and heels. Stevie needed to get to the VIP room where the photos of the model competition contestants were. She was sure Anya would be among them.

Where is Henning?

‘I’m right here.’ Henning placed his hand lightly on her shoulder, reassuring her. So he had been keeping his promise. He was a good man.

‘Henning, no one is going to talk to me,’ Stevie said, touching his hand lightly with her own, just for a second. ‘We need you. How do we get into that VIP area? I don’t think me going up and shaking my tail feathers and smiling at security is going to work in this place.’

‘Where is it?’ Henning glanced over his shoulder, searching for the room.

Stevie pointed up towards the first gallery. Rather brutal looking men were visible, lithe women, sparkling crystal, bubbles, diamonds on a backdrop of smoke. Henning scanned the crowd for what seemed like a very long time.

‘Maxim Krutchik,’ he said finally. ‘The bald one standing with the blonde.’

‘That doesn’t really narrow it . . . ’ Stevie squinted up into the darkness. ‘Oh, yes. I see him.’ A huge man with a perfectly bald pink head and a beautiful blonde on his arm was staring down onto the dance floor below.

‘He’s the head of a logistical services company,’ Henning explained, ‘specialising in Iran, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo.’

‘You mean an arms dealer . . . ’ Stevie raised a sceptical eyebrow.

Henning nodded. ‘Unpleasant man, but he doesn’t know I think so. He thinks we’re great friends. He’s our way in.’

They headed up the stairs towards the VIP gallery. The host of the VIP room went to Maxim’s table and
whispered Henning’s message in his ear, not daring to lay even a chummy hand on his shoulder.

‘Henning,’ Stevie whispered as they were let in, with beaming smiles this time, ‘I’m very suspicious of you now. There are places where a gentleman should not be well known.’

Henning chuckled. ‘Stevie, you sound like my grandmother.’

‘Well, I am sure she was a very sensible woman.’

When Maxim stood to greet them, Stevie realised he was twice as big as she had originally thought, and he had not one but three blondes on his big arms. He gave Henning a bear hug and they were offered a seat at his table.

Maxim pulled a wildly expensive bottle of vodka from amongst twenty or so bottles clustered in the centre of the table. He began filling shot glasses, insisting everyone drink. Stevie was rather glad to down her shot. She was not sure she could face a man like Maxim without a proper drink.

When she saw that Henning and Maxim were deep in conversation, Stevie leaned back into the sofa and became invisible.

*Good. Now, where’s that photo wall . . .*

She scanned the gallery. The back wall was covered with the faces of girls who had been plucked from the crowd to compete for the modelling contract. All very young, most stunning, others a little stunned by the flash. Many of the photos had phone numbers written on them, the girls maybe hoping they would take some VIP man’s fancy and be called up and swept off their feet.

It did not take Stevie long to find Anya’s face. She had definitely been here and she had been singled out. She would have been very happy. The photographer had taken three photos: her wide-set eyes were huge in her face, her wavy blonde hair almost angelic in the harsh light of the flash. In two pictures, she was standing beside a dark-haired girl with beautiful dark eyes and a strong nose.

We should have brought Vadim up here with us, Stevie thought. He would surely recognise the girl. Stevie would have to steal a photo. Her mild kleptomania—usually triggered by bouts of stress—had been useful more than once. Not even the wall noticed as Stevie stepped up, removed a photo and slipped it into her purse.

Back at the table, she sat down and caught Henning’s eye. He rose, Maxim hugging him, kissing him on the lips in the Russian way. Stevie was a little horrified for Henning. Maxim looked like a man who would certainly have ghastly breath.

‘Are you sure you’ve told me the truth, Henning?’ Stevie took his arm as they headed back downstairs to find Vadim. ‘I find it hard to believe that a humble librarian would know people like Maxim Krutchik.’

Henning sighed. ‘I’m not exactly a librarian, Stevie. I’ve explained it to you before: I’m a cataloguer of rare books. The former Soviet Union is full of them, forgotten pieces of odd literature. Many items are instant collectibles. Worth a fortune to some people.’

‘People like Maxim?’ she asked in disbelief.

‘You’d be surprised.’

Vadim stood out on account of his stillness amongst the heaving mass of bodies. He was leaning on the bar, still smoking, still staring at another rum and coke. His pallor, his white hair, his lashless eyes were lit for a moment by a roving spotlight that came to rest on him. For those three seconds, he was incandescent.

Seeing the photo distressed him, reminded him of Anya—as if she was ever far from his mind. But he recognised Petra straightaway.

Stevie put the photo back in her bag. ‘Let’s see if she’s here.’ They split up and set off.

In the centre of the club was a raised stage. On it, a floorshow was in full swing. Three girls in fluorescent bikinis—one with tassels, another with feathers, another with not much on at all—were dancing and gyrating like rubber bands. Diego appeared at Stevie’s side.

‘This is where all the main strippers dance.’ He gestured happily. ‘I am going with Iacopo to the bar. We get you vodka.’

‘Thank you, Diego,’ she called after him, but he had already been swallowed by the crowd.

They were good dancers, quality girls with perfect legs and pretty faces. More expensive than the other girls, Stevie assumed. Petra was not among them. Nor did she appear to be any of the women in tight jeans dotted around the stage, many twisting to the music in a way that suggested they too had spent time on a podium. Smoke machines fed with apple tobacco were pumping out mist like a narghile. It made it hard to see.

Suddenly there was an explosion—somewhere up in the roof. Stevie scanned the gallery, looking for danger. But
the faces were upturned in expectation, not fear.

A man was standing on a railing, five floors up. His arms were raised and Stevie saw there were copper wings strapped to his back. Leaning out, he allowed his body to arc through the air and plummet earthwards, a bungee cord spooling out behind him.

Before he could hit the dancers on the stage, he bounced, flying backwards through the air like Icarus rewound. He tumbled and somersaulted through the foggy air with extraordinary grace.

That’s what I need in life, thought Stevie, a bungee cord.

A shower of glitter rained down as if from some invisible silver cloud. Strobe lights kicked in like flak. The winged man flew, the dancers gyrated with even more energy, and the whole club became a snow-dome of male pleasure.

The Icarus landed gently on the stage and was unhooked from his umbilical cords. He was a small man, almost dwarfish, a hump deforming the upper part of his spine. He climbed quickly down from the podium and pushed his way roughly through the crowd. Stevie thought about how tall and graceful he had looked in the air; how small and constricted on the ground.

She scanned the galleries. The men stared down at the women below, confident in the invisibility of vertical distance. Henning and Vadim were hunting up on levels three and four.

Diego and Iacopo reappeared. ‘We couldn’t see you!’

‘You look like a tiny *bambi*—big eyes,’ Iacopo gestured, ‘like this!’

‘All *minuscola*—like *un foglio di musica*, a piece of sheet music,’ added Diego.

Stevie smiled. ‘That is so I can slip in and out of people’s thoughts unnoticed.’

‘We brought you a drink—’

‘Russian Standard vodka. If you drink only this—’ ‘—you get no hangover. Now you see is three am and is a new show.’

‘The three o’clock show is much more *erotica*.’

‘Come to dance with us!’

Stevie shook her head. The house music was getting heavier.

Stevie pushed through to the other side of the stage. Nobody took any notice of her. It was impossible to find Petra. The place was enormous.

Fresh girls were taking up their positions on the stage. The promoter was clicking his fingers at them, herding them like fowl. These ones looked very young, probably still in their teens. They wore only g-strings and leather caps, backsides swinging, lifting up to the waiting, watching crowd.

The chubby man with the enormous tongue that had so disgusted Stevie was right up front. A tender honey-blonde was waving her buttocks in his face. He was stuffing money into her garter, slowly, making her beg, owning her.

Stevie was mesmerised, not by their bodies but by their faces. They had developed an armour of expression, impenetrable. She thought of the love that must have once been invested by the parents in the future of each dancing girl. That it had come to this.

Stevie finished off the vodka with a deep swallow. It had been a large glass. She knew she was a little drunk. Sadness—or was it anger, despair?—rushed through her. Perhaps it was the stabbing of the pain the faces of the girls could not, would not show . . . did not feel?

What would Anya have felt when she saw them?

Dancing was a good job for girls in Moscow. There was so very little else—for anyone. These girls would be earning, but that their hopes for the future lay in proffering their bottoms to an indifferent crowd seemed like a symptom that the world was off-kilter. No human—no heart—should be so utterly expendable.

Out of nowhere, American dollar bills began to rain down. Stevie raised her eyes to the invisible ceiling, saw the counterfeit fortune in the air, but thought—actually felt; she was no longer thinking—only of the girls, all with mothers, all with dreams. She left her face turned skyward. She didn’t want to see any more dancing babies.

A large bearded man in a leather vest pushed his way through the crowd holding his camera over his head, over the crowd, and started firing. His flashes mixed with the strobe lights and for a second Stevie didn’t notice he was shooting her.
Too late, she spun around. She turned back but the man had disappeared. Ice crackled through her veins. Why had
the man photographed her? Who was he? Was he just a Moscow society snapper, or were the kidnappers watching
the Kozkovs’ building? Whoever the man was, it was too late to stop him.

_You’re a fool to let your guard down like that._

She wondered if he would notice, when he printed the pictures, the two fat tears that were tumbling out of her
eyes.
The phone rang far too shrilly for the morning after a visit to a club. It took Stevie a long time to swim to the surface from her sleep.

‘Hello?’ The phone rang again, startling her. The receiver was in her hand . . .

*Oh. The button.*

It was Vadim. *‘Prostite—sorry for waking you, but I know where Petra is.’*

‘Oh, well done, Vadim.’ Her voice was croaking. Dreadfully embarrassing. In the mirror opposite, Stevie caught sight of her tangled hair, her eyes swollen to the shape of almonds.

‘I talked to Anya’s music teacher.’ Vadim’s voice was excited, urgent. ‘Petra and Anya have the same one. She told me Petra hadn’t come to her lesson because she is in hospital for a small operation.’

‘Well done,’ she repeated. ‘Get visiting hours and we’ll go as soon as we can.’ Stevie struggled to disentangle herself from the heavy bedclothes.

‘Also, Henning left a message for you, Stevie. But he asked me to tell you as well, in case you didn’t check.’

Stevie thanked Vadim and hung up with a groan. She pressed the flashing message button on the hotel phone.

*I’m sorry, Stevie, but some manuscripts have been discovered between the walls of a sultan’s palace. They could possibly date from the Ottoman empire. Or they could be some naughty child’s homework. Anyway, it may be a huge find. The museum has gone berserk and they’ll have my head if I don’t get down there immediately, before the treasure hunters do.*

A headache began to pound through Stevie’s temples like the cavalry. So much for Diego and Iacopo’s Russian Standard vodka theory . . . Or it could have been the nightcap glass of champagne she had drunk in bed before going to sleep.

She had been too emotional to go right to sleep. The dancing girls, Anya’s photo, the girls on the park bench in London, the primrose in Joss’ bed, Norah Wolfe and her hungry smile, all mixed in together, going round and round in her mind, keeping her wide awake. The champagne had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Henning’s voice continued on the phone.

*I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can . . . And Stevie, take Vadim if you go anywhere. Please . . . It’s safer, and it’s doing him good to be involved. Alright . . .*

There was a tiny pause, a minute awkwardness that came through even on the recorded message, as Henning tried to decide what to say next.

*Bye now.*

Stevie reached for the house phone to ring her grandmother then thought the better of it and picked up her mobile.

You never knew who was listening in hotels and she would never compromise Didi’s safety in the slightest degree.

There was no answer at the house in Zurich. Stevie frowned. It was early, but her grandmother always rose at six. She must still be out on her *vita parcours*—a ritual she followed unfailingly every morning and in all weather.

The *vita parcours* was an obstacle course of sorts, a set of tree stumps and gym bars and elevated planks set up at various intervals on the forest trail, with instructions on what exercises had to be performed before one could move on. The formidable lady no longer ran between stations— she walked—but it kept her fit as an eighty-two-year-old fiddle.

Didi had taken Stevie with her every morning when she was a child and she vividly remembered the burn of the freezing air puffing out of her little lungs as she ran along in her thick winter tracksuit, or jogged along under the cool of the heavy green leaves in summer. Their morning run would be followed by a breakfast of blueberry yoghurt with heavy, homemade muesli, then a spoonful of a revolting treacly-brown syrup made of yeast and mountain herbs that Didi insisted was the elixir of life.

Stevie’s flat was near the woods and she still ran the same *vita parcours* every morning that she was home. Some mornings, if she was feeling feeble, she even took the spoonful of yeast syrup.

She lay her head back gingerly on the enormous pillow. The headache had transformed itself into a full body ache. This was no hangover, alas. It was definitely the opening sally of some horrid Slavic flu. There was nothing for it but to swallow aspirin and eat a lemon, rind and all.

She would make her bath extra hot this morning.

The Metropole hotel was a stone’s throw from Red Square. The roads had been salted earlier that morning and the
ice was fast turning into filthy sludge. Passing cars, their windows tinted even though the sun never seemed to shine, sprayed muck, the grime conveniently obscuring their number plates.

Muscovites in matching fur hats and coats strode the boulevards, on some immutable course. In the pale blue mist they looked like bears out for their morning feed. A patrol of four militzia—police—crossed at the lights, so padded in their grey jackets and fur-trimmed hats, submachine guns slung casually over one shoulder, like teddy bears playing at war.

Stevie watched them home in on a shabbily bundled couple. He had a thick black beard. That was suspicion enough. They would have to be stopped, papers scrutinised.

Friday was the day to avoid being stopped if you were a foreigner because the militzia patrols went out looking for vodka money. Although it wasn’t Friday, Stevie avoided crossing just there. She set off to meet Vadim at a tea house, just outside the great red walls of the square.

Stevie passed through the guarded gatehouse, up a small slope, and into Krasnaya Ploshyad. She caught her breath. Every time she came here, she felt she was standing on the top of a beautiful, malevolent mountain. Today, it was covered in snow and people were crisscrossing it on their way to work.

St Basil’s church, with its wildly coloured onion domes and its golden exploding stars, sat like a Faberge jewel at the far side. On Stevie’s left was GUM, the famous shopping arcade, a delicate stone building the colour of vanilla, intricately carved and tipped with pointed copper roofs, now a weathered green. On her right was part of the wall that surrounded the Kremlin, the palace of government itself. The walls were fortress height and the colour of dried blood. Red Square. A massive wrought-iron gate sealed the entrance.

Lenin’s tomb was dug in at the foot of the wall, marked with a heavy slab of dark stone and the simple letters: L’INH. Tourists from Central Asia, in from the steppes to see the famous capital from where their lives had once been ruled, milled about the gates in their furs, tiny dark eyes and pink cheeks, before joining the eternal funeral procession around Lenin’s embalmed body.

It is impossible to pass casually through Red Square. It has a weight that crushes you, a gingerbread beauty that makes the history born from its ugly heart all the more menacing.

A crocodile of schoolgirls in dark coats and white scarves and furry bonnets—like gumnut babies—wove its way past Stevie, towards St Basil’s. GUM was still closed.

Stevie stopped to look at the huge glass windows, the restaurant, luxury goods. Only party members had been allowed to shop there under communism. They had even managed to justify segregated shopping in the name of the revolution. Now it was open to anyone. Anya had been shopping there when she disappeared.

When it was open, guards patrolled the marble galleries and watched the crowds stroll by eating ice-creams. Very little passed unnoticed. It would have been difficult to force Anya out of there. There were guards at every entrance.

Could Anya have gone willingly then? Stevie shook her head. From what she knew of her, it seemed very unlikely. Anya didn’t seem like the type.

The tea house was ugly, but Stevie had expected it would be. There was no tradition of cafés, no café society in Moscow. It was one of the things that had surprised her when she had first come to the city.

Perhaps it was too easy for conversations to be overheard. Talk had been dangerous, often lethal, under communism. People had perhaps preferred to talk in the privacy of their own living rooms, kitchens, cupboards. Or perhaps the party had considered cafés too subversive, too fertile an intellectual climate to be tolerated, having never forgotten that Lenin planned the revolution from the Café Odeon in Zurich, a stone’s throw from the Bellevueplatz.

The café was filled with plastic tables, a mock tile floor and smoke like fog. Vadim was waiting at a table by the window. He looked the part, she thought, for a covert operation: a grey woollen overcoat—the collar turned up to hide his jaw—a black rollneck; the sleeves of an old naval jersey, striped blue and white and worn at the edges, poked out from the black cuffs. An army cap lay on the table bearing the already faded colours of the new Russia.

They ordered hot tea with lemon.

‘The hospital’s not far,’ Vadim began. ‘I will tell them I am a friend of Petra’s and that you are her music teacher.’

Music teacher. Delightful.

Stevie wished she’d worn her most snappy tweed ensemble, hair waved in a didactic but faintly musical style; she would have chosen her long opera pearls, the ones that hung to her navel, and attached a piano key to the clasp, fingers perfumed with rosin from the little violin bows of the children.
The sound began as a low rumble, like distant surf. Stevie ignored it but it grew quickly louder until Vadim noticed it, too. Through the window they saw a mass of people come snaking around the corner, some waving placards, others waving fists, one with a shabby loud hailer. There would have been some three hundred at a rough guess. Militzia were gathering around them like flies, buzzing just out of touch but planning a landing.

The protesters stopped and began to shout at the Kremlin walls, punching the air, shaking their placards. Stevie was tempted to go outside for a closer look but experience (Jakarta, burning tyres, a rather disastrous betchuk chase) had taught her that it never did to get caught in other people’s anger. And in Russia, as in Indonesia, the security forces could be unpredictable.

‘What are they protesting about, Vadim?’ Stevie peered closely, trying to read the placards. The protesters were all women, bundled up tight in the cold with headscarves, their pale faces pinched with pink. Her eyebrows shot up incredulously. ‘Are they—mothers?!’

‘They are from the Mothers’ Rights group.’ Vadim spoke quietly. He lit another cigarette. ‘They are the mothers of soldiers who have disappeared in Chechnya, or been tormented to death by their officers, or who have returned home physically and mentally destroyed, only to be swept under the carpet like ashes.’

Vadim rubbed his scar absentmindedly. It grew red. ‘When you turn eighteen, you are conscripted. You become a “human resource” for the great nation of Russia, and so like that she may do with you what she wishes.’

‘So, it really is as bad as they say.’

He smiled bitterly. ‘Probably worse than you know. Think on this, and every word is true: in 2002, five hundred men were killed—that’s a whole battalion’s worth—but not from fighting a war. They were beaten to death by their own officers. Whole squadrons have deserted because conditions are so bad. The officers steal tanks, weapons, even the few roubles the privates get sent by their parents.’

Vadim looked out at the protesters. The militzia were buzzing in tighter circles now. Trucks had arrived, ominously windowless.

‘These parents are despised by the officers—the Mothers’ Rights group especially. It annoys them that sometimes, just sometimes, their behaviour is so outrageous—’ the poison in Vadim’s voice could have killed a cobra, ‘—and that it transgresses the line between man and beast so flagrantly, that the mothers protest and shout and demand that something be done to discipline the officers who killed their Sascha on a drunken whim.’ He stared out at them. ‘It is worse than a death at the hands of an enemy. There is not even hate or politics behind these murders. They are wholly without purpose, a distraction, an afterthought. They deny the basic humanity of the soldiers.’

His words were a bullet to Stevie’s heart. Vadim was just a boy but he knew the whole world. He had understood the nature of evil, how it began in frigid indifference to other people, and then slid slowly down the scale of good, towards evil. That end . . . that just blurred into a black fog of distance, a horrible, cold, endless stretch.

‘You’re right, Vadim. I think we comfort ourselves with the idea that evil is confined to master plans conceived in great detail by bald men stroking Persian cats with a long manicured fingernail. This puts evil beyond the reach of ordinary men.’

Stevie herself believed that evil began in small acts of selfishness, banal cruelties in a normal day; their horror was that they were casual. To be casual with the lives of others was evil. This was an uncomfortable idea because it meant that everyone had the potential to influence the balance of good and evil on the earth. It demanded that we take individual responsibility. We would all prefer to leave that to someone else.

Stevie’s eyes drifted back to the protest. ‘I don’t think there is ever a clear demarcation between good and evil. There’s no line drawn on the scale that declares, “From here be evil” like those old explorer’s maps of the world that say “Here be monsters”.’ I think what matters is your place on the scale.’

She blew on her lemon tea. ‘Evil is the downward creep, in small, millipede steps, while goodness is the struggle to move up; trying to lift others with you is heroic.’

Real evil required a total absence of the moral imagination. Without the capacity to empathise with the position and pain of others, their suffering, even their existence, somehow didn’t seem real.

‘And your officers, Vadim, are a terrible example,’ Stevie continued. ‘Once the humanity of others has been denied, there is nothing too cruel that cannot be done to them.’

And so now, the core of society, its glue, its respectable members—the mothers and the grandmothers, the pensioners—had to take to the frozen streets with placards. It was proof enough that there was no other way to be heard.
Grey militzia poured like ants from the back of the trucks and surrounded the mothers.
No one was listening.

Even the most robust and glamorous fantasy is difficult to sustain in a hospital. The setting is designed to strip people of all illusions. There is nothing more real than the sick, the injured and those who care for them. Stevie was just managing to hang on to her Mary Poppins music-teacher whimsy, but it was taking effort. At the tangy odour of the lunch trolley (boiled cabbage loaf? chicken gelatine?), she almost came unstuck. But her imagination, often problematically powerful, found a certain satisfaction in the challenge and she soon regained her equilibrium.

Petra Koshka. Her surname meant cat. As they wound their way through long linoleum corridors and swinging double doors, Stevie thought about her cat at home in Zurich. Actually, she shouldn’t say her cat at all. They had simply met one day, walking in opposite directions along the river, she towards the lake, he towards the Bahnhof. Stevie’s romantic disappointment in the Alps was only a week old.

The cat had recently been shaved. Only his head and the tip of his tail retained their former majesty. He was obviously furious and embarrassed and ashamed. Stevie could relate. He had snapped up the end of Stevie’s Bratwurst mit Senf, her grilled veal sausage and mustard lunch. The fact that he had not minded the mustard told Stevie the cat was starving, and she invited him home. She had offered him shelter, at least until his majesty grew back.

Stevie had asked if she could call him Peter. He had turned out to be a gentleman. He was staying with her grandmother at the moment. Peter was clever and polite. He never took food without asking first. When Stevie had wondered if Joss’ reasons for not showing had been genuine—artists were after all unpredictable—Peter had expressed scepticism but she had not listened. A month later her heart was in shreds.

This is only the third time I’ve thought about Joss since I came to Moscow.

But more important matters than Stevie’s unfortunately eager heart were at hand.

Vadim pushed open the door to Petra’s room. A girl lay back on the starched hospital pillows, like a dried flower in an envelope. She had long dark hair and a big bandage across the middle of her face. It could be the girl in the photo. Really, it was hard to tell.

‘Petra?’ Vadim asked, walking quickly towards her.

The mummy face turned. She had two swollen eyes, a deep shiny red like plums, and greenish-yellow bruising on the visible skin of her face. Poor girl, thought Stevie, and immediately wondered if she had been bashed. And by whom . . . The possibility that Petra would have something to add to Anya’s mystery was growing.

‘Vadim. Privyet!’ She tried a smile but that seemed to hurt her.

‘What happened, Petra? Did someone hurt you?’

‘No, Vadim,’ she said dismissively. ‘Don’t be stupid. Haven’t you ever seen a post-op nose job?’ She touched her bandages lightly. ‘My mum’s had three. And liposuction. If you want to see bad, that’s bad. But she looks hot at forty. I’m going to do the same, but I probably won’t wait till I’m forty.’

Petra obviously wasn’t feeling that bad.

‘I’m so happy you came to see me. Can you change the TV channel? The food in here sucks.’

‘Your dad paid for you to get a nose job?’

Stevie shared Vadim’s incredulousness but only sneezed twice, and said nothing.

‘Of course he did,’ the mummy answered scomnfully. ‘Anyway, it only makes him look better in the end, doesn’t it? Hot wife, hot, hot daughter.’ Petra tried to smile again and winced with pain.

Vadim gestured with his hand. ‘This is my friend, Stevie.’ Petra glanced at Stevie, saw she was pretty and paid more attention. ‘She’s trying to help me find Anya.’

‘Oh my God. She’s still missing? What do you think’s happened to her? I thought she would have turned up by now.’ Petra swallowed with some difficulty and looked at the boy. ‘That’s really scary, Vadim.’

‘We need your help, Petra.’ Stevie sat down by her bedside. ‘We think Anya’s been kidnapped and we need to find out by whom. It will help us negotiate when the kidnappers make contact—are they professional, opportunists, politically motivated—so we know how to deal, and how far to push them.’

‘Totally.’ Petra looked away to the TV. ‘Umm . . . I don’t know anything I haven’t already told Vadim on the phone. Anya and I were shopping. We got coffee and I got up to pay and when I came back, she was gone. I tried
‘We tried Anya’s phone all that night, too. But there was no answer.

Then it went dead.’ Vadim stood at Stevie’s shoulder. She could sense he didn’t much like Petra.

Petra kept batting her eyes at the pale boy. She, on the other hand, clearly had a giant crush.

‘Were you with anyone else, Petra?’

She shook her head.

‘Did you notice anyone watching Anya? Did anyone try to talk to you?’

Petra snorted. ‘Guys are always staring, trying to talk to us.’ She caught the look in Stevie’s eye and grew subdued. ‘But no one did that day. I didn’t notice anyone looking at us.’

Stevie turned to Vadim. ‘The people who snatched her would have got rid of the phone as soon as they took her. Too much risk that police could pinpoint a location if the phone was turned on or if Anya managed to make a call.’

‘Maybe she just ran away? You know she always wanted to model . . .’ Petra could see she was getting Vadim’s attention and continued eagerly along this track. ‘Maybe she was trying to sign up with an agency in New York. She always wanted to go there. She would have done anything to be a model.’

Stevie picked up the jealousy in Petra’s reasoning and pounced.

‘Petra, did anyone ever approach Anya about modelling?’

Petra began to pick at the blanket on her bed, ripping out the cotton threads one by one. Finally she spoke.

‘Yeah. At Zima’s model comp. They picked both of us, you know.’

‘Yes. You are very beautiful, Petra. You would make a very good model.’ Stevie laid her words carefully on the girl. She brightened under her bandage.

‘Yeah. After this nose job I’m going to go for it. I’m getting a contract, you know.’

‘Did Anya get a contract?’

‘Umm. Well, she was going to and . . . yeah. I mean, I don’t know.’

It was unlikely this sort of information would have slipped Petra’s mind. Stevie watched her face, the picking fingers, said nothing.

Petra didn’t like silence. She found it uncomfortable when no one was talking. And she wanted to show off to Vadim.

‘She was going to be in the finals of the modelling competition,’ she said.

‘Go on, Petra. You’re being very helpful.’ Stevie smiled at her with a warmth she did not feel. Petra knew something and she wasn’t telling them.

‘Anyway, it doesn’t mean that much.’

Stevie kept her eyes steady on Petra’s face. ‘Were you also going to be in the competition?’

‘They asked but I said no. I wanted to get my nose job first.’

Petra was lying. It wasn’t hard to spot. The organisers had obviously asked Anya and not Petra to model for them and she was understandably jealous.

‘Vadim, have you got—?’ Vadim handed Stevie Anya’s chain. Stevie let the evil eye spin and sway in the air, the blue glass bright in the dim hospital light.

‘They called it nazar-a shaitaan in Persia—the eye of Satan, who is the great tempter. Anya had it on her chain.’ Stevie paused slightly, watching for Petra’s reaction. ‘In tradition, the evil eye is cast by envious thoughts that bring the envied person withering and harm. People wear a blue eye because it is supposed to bounce the thoughts back to the person who is thinking them.’

‘So? It’s a stupid club thing. I don’t know why she wore it.’

Stevie kept her voice low and steady. ‘I think she wore it because she knew you were jealous.’

‘Crap! I don’t need to be jealous of her.’ Petra was angry now.

Good.

‘I’ve got my own contract lined up. I’m going to be shit-hot famous. Like Natalia Vodianova. That was the deal.’

That was the deal.

Stevie stood over Petra, leaned down. ‘Listen, Petra,’ her voice was a razor blade. ‘Anya’s been kidnapped by
some very dangerous people. If you don’t tell me exactly what happened, the next time they call about the money I’m going to tell them you told us everything.’

No one had made verbal contact yet but Petra wasn’t to know that.

‘Do you know what people like that do to girls who snitch?’ Stevie leaned further in, her voice almost a whisper. ‘They call it “the joker”. They slice the corners of the girl’s mouth up on either side with razor blades, halfway through the cheek. For the rest of her life, the horrible scar makes the girl look like she’s smiling.’ Stevie saw the terror well up in Petra’s eyes and pressed on. ‘You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you?’

Petra shook her head, numb.

‘It would be so easy for me to let your name slip,’ Stevie whispered.

‘I’d take it back—I really would if I could!’ Petra’s voice was laced with panic.

‘It’s too late, Petra. You made your choice. Helping us now is the only thing you can do to start making this right.’

Petra was crying now, her purple slits spilling trickles of clear slime.

‘This guy started talking to me at the club,’ she whimpered. ‘Anya had gone on stage and I was watching her. He said, “Oh she’s not as pretty as you!” then he said he was sorry and that Anya was obviously my friend and he shouldn’t say things like that. I said not to worry, that Anya thought she was so pretty, but that I was going to get a nose job and show everyone.’

Stevie nodded. ‘Good girl, go on.’

‘The guy said that Anya would do very well in a secondary market—like Greece or Japan—but that I had the potential to be a “top girl” and work in Paris and New York. He said he would like to introduce Anya to his friend who had an agency in Japan. If I would set up the meeting, he would persuade her to go to Japan and I would get a contract with a top agency. They told me to take her to tea at GUM the day after next, to tell her they were friends of mine, good guys, who had modelling contracts for both of us. It was easy. Anya wanted to go to New York so badly.’

Petra raised her eyes to Vadim’s, but they were like chips of ice.

Petra quailed. ‘He promised to make me famous! Really famous!’

‘You didn’t think about what might happen to Anya?’ Vadim’s voice was hoarse with anger.

‘I didn’t care! Anya thought she was so beautiful. This guy said I would be on billboards in Times Square!’ Petra was not finding the understanding she craved from the two people in the room.

Stevie pulled the interrogation back on track. ‘Were these men Russian?’

Petra nodded. ‘One was quite short, dark hair, kind of a lumpy face. I think he said his name was Sascha. The other guy was tall. He never told us his name.’

‘You sold Anya because you wanted to be a supermodel,’ Vadim was trembling. Stevie watched closely in case he made a sudden lunge at the girl in the bed.

‘I didn’t know they were bad guys!’

Vadim just stared at her, struck dumb by Petra’s stupidity. Petra turned to Stevie, angry at her now, angry that Stevie had made Vadim hate her so.

‘We all want to get out! We have to do what we can to survive. You wouldn’t understand!’

‘Petra, you bought your dog diamonds.’ Vadim’s words were soft with hate. ‘How can you justify it that way? You cashed in my sister’s life to buy the one thing you couldn’t charge to your black Amex: fame!’

Minutes later Stevie and Vadim were hurrying back across Red Square, the extreme cold making it difficult to breathe and walk and talk at the same time.

‘This place,’ Vadim spat, gesturing at the Kremlin walls, ‘it deforms people’s souls.’

It didn’t take a Moscow upbringing for that. Unfortunately, Stevie had met people all over the world who might have made the same trade as Petra.

‘So how do we find this Sascha, Stevie? What do we do now? I could kill that girl.’

‘Vadim, save your energy for your sister—’

Puff.

‘—you will need it when the kidnappers call. I’m afraid hunting for a “Sascha”—a nickname and probably not
even real—and whose physical description matches almost every man in Zima—’

Huff.

‘—is not going to be a good use of our time. But—’ Puff puff.
‘—we do know this—’

Huff huff puff.

‘—do you think we could talk somewhere inside, Vadim?’

The snow had begun to fall heavily and it was difficult not to inhale the huge flakes with every breath.

They went through the revolving glass doors and into the blessed warmth of GUM. The place was gigantic, galleries filled with shoppers running under a vast glass dome. It was the sort of place where no one would be able to remember a face.

Stevie paused. She had the distinct feeling that they were being watched. She couldn’t spot a tail, but that didn’t mean anything. Good surveillance was very difficult to detect. A shiver crawled across her scalp and she hurried to catch up to Vadim.

The café was on the ground floor. Vadim said he had been there every day since Anya’s disappearance, asking the staff if they remembered her. It seemed no one did.

‘Either no one remembers her, or this Sascha paid them to forget.’

He suddenly sounded very tired. ‘We won’t get anywhere with our questions here.’

Stevie put her hand on the young man’s arm. ‘Well, it was the smart thing to do, Vadim. Sascha was probably trusted muscle hired to do the actual kidnapping. I doubt a key person would have risked being seen here. Shall we sit down?’

Stevie took the menu, her eyes hovering between coffee, and the strawberry tsarina, a drink made of strawberry ice-cream and champagne.

When the tsarina arrived, pale pink in a long flute, Stevie was glad she hadn’t chosen coffee. It was not necessary to be sensible in Moscow. She took a cautious sip.

‘I think the people who took Anya are professionals,’ she told Vadim. ‘They didn’t just want some girl, they wanted her specifically. They did extensive target surveillance from the sound of it, and certainly had been watching Anya for a while before Petra was approached. This is pretty standard kidnapper modus operandi.’

Stevie lit one of her black cigarettes and considered her next words. ‘It would have been simple to pass the girls invitations to the model night at Zima. What teenage girl could resist, especially Petra. From there, it was a pretty safe bet that Anya would come to the club— without her parents—and they were smart enough to figure out that Petra was the weak link—’

‘—to say the least!’

‘Right. But the point of Petra is, had these guys been after money, why not take her? She is impressionable and gullible and her father has a lot more money. No. They wanted Anya because of who she was. They want to get to your father.’

‘To take revenge?’

Stevie took another sip of the magical tsarina. ‘If they had just wanted to punish your father,’ Stevie looked into Vadim’s glacier eyes, ‘they would probably have shot Anya dead outside the house. They didn’t do that. They chose a much riskier plan.’

‘How is not killing someone riskier?’

‘Kidnapping someone involves all sorts of extras: you need to have a safe hideout where you can keep the victim hidden and stop them escaping, which means armed guards, food supplies and so on. You have to establish ways to communicate with each other, and with the family of the victim. It is a lot more dangerous than assassinating someone because there are lots more ways of getting caught.’

Vadim snorted. ‘This is Russia. No one gets caught if they can pay their way out. You remember when Klebnikov was shot?’

‘The Russian editor of Forbes, yes.’

‘The only two people the police arrested got let off in May. It’s not a great deterrent to murder, is it?’

‘Look, Vadim, the more things drag on, the more people begin to ask uncomfortable questions and the more room there is for things to go wrong. That means that the people who took Anya have every reason to make contact. I
think as long as your father is useful to the kidnappers, Anya is safe.’

‘Safe?’

‘It’s relative. They won’t kill her.’

Vadim grew silent, taking this in. Stevie finished her drink and they stood to go. Outside, the snow was falling so heavily that the Kremlin walls had all but been obscured by cascading flakes. Stevie wondered what the birds did when the weather was like this. Probably migrated.

They trudged through the snow without talking. Suddenly, Vadim turned to her. ‘Is it true what you said to Petra, about the joker?’

‘I got it from a Batman film. I was hoping Petra hadn’t seen it. It was all I could think—’ A huge sneeze blew away the end of her sentence.
It was true, thought Anya, that you heard more with your eyes closed. Anya’s hearing had always been good but now, after so long with a blindfold—how long had it been?—it felt as if her hearing had become almost superhuman.

She now knew, for example, that she was being held in a tiny bathroom in a large block of flats. The hollow sound of the paperboard walls, the muffled noise of living—radios, voices, clashing cooking pots, water pipes, children running—wafted all around her. It was a symphony of sounds that could only have been composed by layers of people living on top of each other.

She also knew that she was being held by two people, a man and a woman. His name was Gregori and hers was Tamara. They argued a lot, mostly about money.

Right now, although she couldn’t see out of the window, she knew it was snowing heavily. Tamara was complaining it would ruin her hair. Anya guessed by the strong perfume Tamara wore that she had long and elaborate hair. She knew she wore lots of rings by the sound her fingers made when she picked up a mug or a glass.

Sometimes Tamara would get bored and slide the bathroom door open and talk to her, mostly about celebrity gossip. Anya knew conversation with her captors was a good thing so she tried to forget how strange it was to be discussing Nicole Kidman’s latest hair style, or Sandy Belle’s newest handbag, with the woman who was holding her prisoner, blindfolded, her hands tied firmly to a drainpipe.

Tamara was jealous of everyone. She read endless gossip magazines and worshipped Sandy Belle. Anya thought that maybe seeing how much some people had made you feel dissatisfied with what you had. People became envious and hungry and mean.

She thought about Petra. Someone had told a story about Natalia Vodianova, Russia’s most famous supermodel, who had returned home to Nizhny Novgorod for a visit with her husband. She had gone out to a restaurant and a girl had tried to throw acid in her face. Petra had thought the story funny.

Anya shook her head. She didn’t want to think about her. She didn’t want to think about anything. She had cried till her blindfold was soggy so many times. She tried to distract herself by listening even harder to the conversation in the kitchen.

‘We shouldn’t even be arguing about this, Gregori.’ Tamara was in full flight. ‘Not fighting. I just can’t believe a handbag could be worth that much and—’

‘It shows how ignorant you are. It’s not an ordinary handbag—it’s a Birkin bag.’

‘But Tamara, my darling, it costs $85,000—’

‘You have beautiful bags—what about all the other ones I bought you that you had to have?’

The air crackled with fury.

Gregori again, placating. ‘Tamara, if we do the whole thing ourselves, maybe we can get much more—’ ‘Gregori, you will only screw it up like you screw up everything. Have you even read the statistics? Ninety-eight per cent of these things go wrong at the handover—it’s by far the most dangerous and difficult part. Do you really think you can beat the odds? Frankly, I don’t and—’ There was something muffled Anya couldn’t quite make out and then the voices became clear again.

‘—cash is a sure thing and there is zero risk.’

‘I’m thinking of our future, Tamushcka. We could buy a small house in the country and—’ ‘I don’t want to live in the fucking country! I want a Birkin bag.’

Anya almost felt pity for Gregori at that point. Almost. Tamara was a horrible woman. She wondered if they were talking about her. They always seemed to be buying and selling and trading something. Probably stolen goods.

She heard Gregori reply, ‘Alright. I’ll call him tonight, Tamushka. I’ll make him the offer.’

Anya stiffened. Did Gregori mean her father? Was he going to call her father? Her father would pay, and then she could go home. The nightmare would be over.
Irina had a Borshoi hound named Saskia. She was so slender—as Borshois are—that she was hard to see front-on. Her long, ash-brown fur hung like the fringing on a Persian carpet. At one end drooped a melancholic tail; at the other, a slim, pointed face peeped from under stringy ears, small, sad eyes searching the room with a gentleness that was heartbreaking.

‘She’s looking for Anya,’ said Irina. Saskia gave a little whimper at the name before turning herself in a neat circle three times and settling at Stevie’s feet. She laid a hand on the tiny head to comfort the elegant creature and turned to Irina.

‘I’m sorry about Petra. People are capable of the most thoughtless cruelties.’

They were both sitting on the sofa. Irina’s eyes were swollen and scanned the empty grey sky outside, looking for answers.

‘She used to come for dinner occasionally. I preferred to have her here than for Anya to go to Petra’s house. Her parents are different people,’ she told Stevie. ‘They value things because of how much other people want them. Life for them is a competition and they can’t be without the gaze of other people on them. They teach Petra these values.’

Irina refilled their tea glasses from the samovar and laced both with good whisky. It would, she had promised, chase Stevie’s cold away.

‘I remember the morning of the day Anya disappeared, and I remember I was angry at my manicurist because she had overbooked and had to cancel my appointment. I had a lunch with my friends. It was inconvenient. That evening my world changed. I can still remember that I was angry about my manicure, but now I can’t remember how that felt—to be able to be angry about my nail polish. Now I just feel numb.’

Stevie reached out and took Irina’s tiny hand, cold despite the warm tea glass. ‘Irina, it’s a terrible time, the waiting. It will take an enormous toll on you, and on your husband, and on Vadim. I’ve seen it before. You must be gentle with yourself. And most of all, remember that Anya was taken by criminals and that they are to blame for all of this. There was nothing you could have done, and it has nothing to do with being angry about a small thing like your nails.’ She gave Irina’s hand a tiny, reassuring squeeze.

‘It’s the way of the world. All things coexist: manicures and earthquakes and burnt toast and nuclear bombs and red balloons and civil wars. Does that make sense?’

Irina nodded and lit a cigarette. She sat back into the sofa, turning her face to the ceiling so that the tears in her eyes could not escape.

‘She is so precious to me, Stevie.’

Stevie wanted to get to know the family as much as possible before negotiations with the kidnappers began. It would help predict how each member would react and how much they could handle. Potential problems or disagreements could be warded off well before the critical hours. It would also help the family trust the negotiator.

One person and one person only had to be elected to deal with the kidnappers. It should not be a member of the immediate family because they were too emotionally involved. It was also vital to present a totally united front. Any dissent detected by the kidnappers would open windows for experienced ones to demand more, and for inexperienced ones to panic and perhaps kill the victim.

Stevie was frightened at the prospect of being even partially responsible for Anya’s safe return. She would feel a lot better once Constantine Dinov arrived to take over.

‘Do you want to hear her play?’ Irina got up and put a new disk in the CD player. ‘Anya recorded this in the summer. It’s the melody from Adagio in G minor—Tomaso Albinoni.’

Stevie and Irina sat smoking in the pale daylight as a violin began to sing of fathomless longing as plaintively as any human voice. It was as if Anya was there in the room with them, speaking to them, telling them of all the things she felt and dreamed and still wanted to do and see.

Backlit by the winter light from the window, white snakes of smoke curled in the air above their heads, writhing in exquisite agony with every note drawn from the invisible bow. They expressed all the things that the two women had no words for.

Stevie tumbled, literally, into her hotel room. Her Slavic virus had made her slightly light-headed and Irina’s whisky tea seemed to be wrestling it with vigour. The velvet curtains had been drawn but Stevie pulled them back. She wanted to watch the snow spiral out of the sky.

She had never seen such flakes, the size of a baby’s palm.
By the orange light of the street lamps, it seemed like the snow would never stop falling. It ought to have felt like Christmas, with sleigh bells and singing and cinnamon biscuits shaped like angels and stars. But tonight, in Moscow, the interminable fall that covered everything in white felt like an erasure. It was obliterating and obscuring—white, as black, impenetrable. It was burying everyone alive, imposing silence. Each snowflake absorbed the words, the noises, swallowed them, left nothing. Like evil. Stevie wondered if it would ever be summer again.

Melancholy and a weeping nose were bad signs. Stevie ordered room service—vodka, black toast, and Salade Russe, for one.

*When in Russia . . .*

Her grandmother made *Salade Russe* on every Sunday after October the twentieth, the date she claimed as the day the ‘indoor season’, as she called it, officially began: diced carrot, potato (boiled, waxy, hard), peas and a mayonnaise dressing, the odd gherkin if she was feeling particularly spry.

Stevie pulled out her phone and rang Zurich. There was still no answer. On a whim, she tried Didi’s mobile. Stevie had bought it for her two years ago, despite great resistance on her grandmother’s part. Stevie had tried to reason with her: ‘It’s all very well to be independent, Didi, but do you also have to be unreachable?’

‘I don’t need to be monitored, Stevie darling. I’m quite capable of taking care of my own old bones. I’ve done it for eighty-two years.’

Stevie tried a different line. ‘Well, what if I need you? What if it’s me who needs help and I can’t find you?’ At that, Didi had relented and agreed to carry the phone with her. It was rarely switched on.

However, tonight, after six long rings, Stevie’s grandmother answered, a cautious ‘Yes?’

‘Didi! It’s Stevie. Where are you?’

‘In the mountains, darling. I thought Peter could do with a rest cure, so we left Zurich this morning and now we’re snug in *Im Heimeli*.’

Didi owned a tiny wooden chalet outside Sils Maria, in the Enga-dine valley. *Im Heimeli*, the chalet, had an enormous wood-burning stove—a *Kachelofen*—and goose-down duvets on little wooden bucket-beds. But it had no phone. That was something Stevie loved about it when she was there, but it used to worry her when her grandmother was there alone. If she needed to speak to Didi, Stevie used to have to ring the post office and they would send a man through the snow or the mud or the wildflowers to deliver the message. Her grandmother would then walk to the post office and place a call. Now Didi had the mobile it was a little easier to get in touch.

‘How is Peter coping?’

‘Asleep on the *Kachelofen* as we speak. He hasn’t moved from there since we arrived.’

Stevie smiled. Being involuntarily hairless, he would be feeling the cold.

‘And how are you, Didi?’

‘Couldn’t be better! Mountain air does wonders for the constitution. I’m going to see if I can persuade Peter to come *langlauf*ing with me around the lake tomorrow morning.’

Stevie laughed. ‘I don’t like your chances!’ The vision of Peter floundering after her grandmother through the snowdrifts as she swooshed past on her ancient cross-country skis was charming. Stevie found she was missing both the lady and the cat terribly. Her grandmother and some gold-tinted memories were everything that she had left of life with her parents.

‘I hope I’m just like you, Didi, when I’m eighty.’

‘Eighty-two, darling. It’s been a good long life—I can’t complain.

Well, there’s only one thing I would change, but then, if I changed that, I might not have you so close to me, so . . .’

‘You mean my mother.’

Of course she did.

Stevie’s mother—Didi’s daughter—Marlise had been Swiss, a beautiful bohemian who smiled at the world and wore bangles on each wrist that tinkled whenever she moved. Stevie’s father, Lockie, was Scottish, a charming, disarming *bon vivant*, at home everywhere and anywhere, full of curiosity, the life of every party. They travelled the world with great style and flair, collecting rare and beautiful furnishings from all over the globe for their rich and discerning clientele.

Sometimes Stevie went with them. She had memories of sitting on a bathing elephant in Sri Lanka, flying a kite in Rajasthan, monkeys in a Moroccan bazaar. Other times she stayed at home with her grandmother, and her parents
had brought something back for her: a Bedouin lamp made of camel skin, a ceramic tiger, a small dragon from Bhutan. These precious objects had made her long for the world. She still had them all.

When Stevie was five years old, she had gone with her parents to Algeria. It was hot—she remembered the heat burning her lips with every breath, scorching her feet through her thin rubber-soled shoes. They were driving through the desert in their jeep, the rush of the wind felt good on her face and she grew sleepy with the jolting of the dirt road and the sound of her parents’ muted chatter.

Little Stevie lay down on the back seat and stared at the empty white sky above. The sun was still high and it hurt her eyes. Her mother pulled an embroidered crimson shawl from her bag and covered her, shielding her from the glare. Stevie felt safe and happy under the shawl and soon fell asleep.

She woke with a jolt, unsure what had disturbed her. She heard a thundering by her head—horses’ hooves galloping—and there were shouts. The jeep stopped abruptly, the momentum shoving Stevie’s body forward and off the seat. She landed heavily on the floor, smashing her elbow.

Loud bangs like firecrackers, then her mother screamed. It was the most frightening sound Stevie had ever heard.

Everything went still and quiet.

Her elbow throbbed but she was too afraid to move. Better not to move or breathe; if she stayed still enough, the bad thing might go away.

Stevie lay there for hours. The sunlight filtered through the cover over her eyes and made it glow red like blood. It was so hot and it was hard to breathe. Mamma and Pappa weren’t talking anymore and she didn’t want to know why. She was too afraid of what her little instincts told her was the truth.

The sunlight faded and it grew cold. Stevie knew she was all alone in the desert and no one was coming to find her. She let her bones absorb the stillness and the silence and the cold, and surrendered to the universe.

But Stevie survived. She was found semiconscious three days later by the French Foreign Legion, although she couldn’t remember any of it.

She was told she was lucky to be alive and sent to live with her grandmother in Switzerland.

For six months, Stevie didn’t speak. Her grandmother took her to the mountains and set about trying to piece back together her granddaughter’s tiny shattered heart.

She remembered David Rice visiting occasionally. He and Didi would talk late into the night in serious voices. One spring, he brought news: the Algerian investigating authorities found that Marlise and Lockie had been mistaken for important symbols of European power and assassinated. The area was thought to have been safe. The motive for the killing was later changed to ‘robbery’ by the officials. The killers were never found.

Stevie had been too young to be more than horribly confused at the time, but the light in her little life went out. The confusion had remained until she grew old enough, then it was replaced by a sense of waste. The sadness had never eased.

The murder of her parents had made her very aware of the possibility of sudden death as a child. She would still climb that tree or ski off the cliff anyway, but she always did it with a full calculation of the dangers involved. She became fascinated with both random and strategic— and strategically random—violence.

It was only natural, she supposed, that she had been drawn to the field of risk assessment. She felt she needed to keep people safe so that what had happened to her never happened to someone else’s child. Those hours alone under the shawl in the back seat had hot-fused into her brain. She never forgot how alone you could be, how terrifying it felt to be abandoned and surrounded by the violence of strangers.

Her grandmother’s voice on the phone brought her back to the present. ‘And how is London?’

Stevie paused a moment before answering. ‘Actually, I’m in Moscow, Didi. Doing a favour for a friend.’

Silence on the line. Then, ‘I’m sorry, Stevie. I’ll never stop worrying about you, no matter how much faith I have in you. I’m not a nervous woman, but I do know the world.’

‘I’m safe, Didi, I promise. There’s nothing at all to worry about.’

When Stevie hung up the phone, she hoped to goodness it was true.

Room service arrived under a silver dome, a baby bottle of vodka chilled in a silver bucket of ice. The kind concierge had thought that a woman staying alone in a Moscow hotel room—however luxurious—might be in need of solace and had added a copy of Hello magazine.

What Stevie saw on the cover should not have surprised her. In fact, it didn’t really. It was more that the existence of the Hammer-Belles and their baby Kennedy-Jack had completely slipped her mind. All three beamed in hyper-
colour from the front cover, glazed and perfect like candied fruit.

Rice had put Owen Dovetail on their job and she couldn’t imagine this going down too well with the soft-spoken, knuckle-dented Welshman. Dovetail was the perfect man to coordinate their protection programme because he was utterly phlegmatic and no amount of gyronisers or mushroom tea or male nannies would ever disrupt his detached cool. Being fiercely patriotic, he had room only for one media personality and that was Catherine Zeta-Jones. The photo was of the three stars (because surely now Kennedy-Jack had become public property) on one of the Kensington Palace lawns. Stevie recognised the Romanian embassy in the background, with its mysteriously barred attic windows. The Hammer-Belles had undoubtedly befriended some of the lesser Windsors by now and they would want everyone to know it. Things like Windsors went down very well with Americans, especially in Hollywood.

Stevie shifted the armchair so that it faced the big dark window. The snow was still falling and, illuminated by the outdoor lights of the hotel, the flakes were a shower of sparks.

Stevie poured herself a little vodka. The salad, in its elaborate red-and-gold porcelain dish, looked appetising. She raised her fork and of course, the hotel phone rang.

It could only be Henning.

Stevie was disconcerted to find her first reaction was a flutter of nervousness.

It’s just Henning! she told herself firmly. She took a sip of vodka and picked up the receiver.

‘Rice here, Stevie. Where in God’s name are you?’

‘The Metropole—you just rang me here.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I mean what are you doing in Moscow?’

‘I’m on leave, like you ordered.’

‘And you need Constantine Dinov? What’s going on there, Stevie?’ Rice sounded furious and Stevie was glad there were miles between them.

‘A friend needed my help.’

‘Valery Kozkov is a friend of yours?’ There was more than a hint of sarcasm in his question.

How did he always know everything?

‘Henning. My friend Henning is close to Kozkov. I’m just giving the family some advice, nothing more.’

‘I hope you haven’t got up to your neck in Moscow just so you can avoid Joss Carey.’ Rice had found her tearing up in the corridor, two days after she’d found the primrose. He had known exactly why and immediately taken her to lunch in a dark pub where she could be as invisible as she liked. Stevie had been very grateful . . .

The photo in the papers that morning had ambushed her—Joss out clubbing with Norah Wolfe—and the two were described, in an accompanying piece celebrating the event, as ‘giggling like schoolyard crushes’.

Stevie was sure Joss had never giggled with her. Her heartache had been hard even for Stevie to hide.

‘I’m not trying to avoid anyone. I’m taking a holiday,’ she told Rice.

Rice on the other end was silent. His scepticism hummed down the line.

Stevie took another large sip of vodka. She had a sudden mental image of lipstick on a jam jar in Joss’ studio—why had she not suspected anything then?—and the way he had looked at Norah that night . . .

‘How are the Hammer-Belles?’ she asked as a way of changing the subject.

‘Actually, that’s why I’m ringing, not just to harass you.’ Stevie smiled. She liked the way David Rice always emphasised the first part of the word: har—ass.

‘They are planning a trip to St Moritz. They want you with them.’

‘Oh no.’ Stevie put her glass down carefully on the table.

‘Afraid so.’

‘Can they be discouraged?’

‘Afraid not. They’re planning to attend some sort of society function up there.’

‘David, I really don’t know if I can take this on. When are they going?’

‘They’ve been vague on details. I’ll have the necessary information in the next day or so.’ He shuffled some papers, obviously still in the office. ‘And while you’re in Moscow, Analysis would like a security situation report
from you—the word on the street, as they say.’

‘No problem. I’ll put something together.’

There was a pause in the conversation.

‘Stevie, I know why you asked for Dinov. I know Valery Kozkov’s daughter is missing.’

The words sank down the line like pebbles in a pond. How?!

‘I hope you’re not up to anything. It’s the sort of thing you might be tempted to try to put right.’

Stevie said nothing.

‘It’s too dangerous, Stevie. A negotiator is not a safety net for you.

He won’t be able to protect you if things go wrong. Russia is a law unto itself—I don’t need to tell you that.’

Stevie did not reply. If the line was bugged, if someone was listening, she would have to be very careful what she said.

‘I appreciate the advice, David, and the concern. Actually, I have seen Kozkov but he is a friend of Henning’s, you see, that’s all.’ She spoke brightly and cheerfully. ‘He made no mention of his daughter.’

A brief silence on the line as Rice got the message.

‘Well, that’s good to hear, Stevie.’ His voice was as hard as an iron bar. ‘We wouldn’t want Marlise and Lockie worrying.’

He rang off.

The reference to her mother and father was Rice code for ‘I don’t want to see you shot dead in some godforsaken place’. Stevie appreciated David Rice’s protective instincts. No doubt it came from some sense of responsibility to her parents. Rice had spent a lot of time with their little family—a bachelor with nowhere to go for Sunday lunches, Easter feasts and snowy Christmas Eves.

Stevie wanted his admiration more than anything, maybe his love. Were the two not tied? He was her boss and her parents’ friend, but he was also the man she most admired in the world, and her anchor. She wanted so much to prove herself to him, but somehow he made her feel that, deep-down, he still doubted she was really up to the job.

Would Rice ever decide she was good enough to be at the centre of things? Celebrities and situation reports were one thing, but the really exciting clients were the ones the public rarely heard about. The Hammer-Belles fell into the ‘celebrity hand-holding’ category and she was rather dreading them. She hoped she could get Anya back before Rice called her away to Switzerland. What would she do then?

Stevie gave up on her dinner and lit a cigarette, touching the vodka to her lips to warm them.

And what about Henning?

Changing into the hotel robe, which was man-size and completely overwhelmed her, Stevie wondered what her friend was up to.

She looked in the mirror: her head was a tiny pale dot in a mound of white towelling, her small hands poking out of the rolled-up sleeves.

That’s it. I’m ringing Henning.

And the phone rang, just as if he had heard.

‘Well? Is it the sultan’s secret diary?’ Stevie struggled onto the bed and lay back on the pillows, cradling the receiver.

Henning gave a low chuckle. ‘Close, Stevie. It’s a book of flowers.’

‘Oh. Is that a disappointment? I suppose you would have preferred something rather bloody, with warriors, and scimitars parting heads from infidel necks.’

‘It’s actually a tremendous find from the sultan’s harem. You would love it. It’s a code book really, but the cipher is floral.’ Henning sounded incredibly excited.

‘All the sultans had at least one hundred wives. That much I know. So what was the code for?’ Stevie was genuinely intrigued, and the subject was a good distraction from her own thoughts.

‘The sultan’s wives used flowers to send secret messages to their lovers. Each flower had a different meaning. They could compose quite elaborate messages in bouquets and send them out. And then they would receive the most innocent-looking reply: a bunch of beautiful flowers.’ Henning laughed again. ‘Gives a whole new meaning to “flowery language”, doesn’t it?’
‘But wasn’t that terribly dangerous? They would have had their heads cut right off for the least suspicion I’m sure.’

‘But think, Stevie: one man and over one hundred, two hundred wives. Most of them essentially ignored, given luxury but denied love or acknowledgement. Indignation can embolden the most feeble heart.’

‘And you found their code?’ Stevie smiled into the phone, glad Henning had called.

‘It’s beautifully illustrated, too.’

She could hear Turkish music blaring in the background. ‘How is Istanbul?’ Stevie closed her eyes and dreamed of the city.

‘It’s covered in snow. The minarets have little white caps, and today they were just jutting out from the fog. The light is this soft grey colour, like daylight through a paper screen.’

‘I’ve never been to Istanbul,’ Stevie said wistfully. ‘They say the most romantic sight in the world is the Bosphorus by moonlight.’

‘By moonlight, from the water, when the city is covered in snow.

It would break your heart.’

Stevie sighed. ‘Are you going then, tonight, with raki bottles and daggers, to raid the other boats?’

Henning harrumphed in amusement. ‘Perhaps another night. It’s not something I would want to do alone. Perhaps if you were here with me, the adventure would hold more charm.’

His words stirred in Stevie something tiny, a butterfly wing of undefined emotion. Was it sorrow?

**Stevie sat at the table** by the window in her bathrobe and pearls. There was nothing to see outside. A freezing fog was hovering over the boulevards, cloaking everything in a dove-grey tinged with dirty yellow. Out in the nothingness, it was –40 degrees. She had been chewing away at the Moscow situation report for Hazard since the night before.

The headlines of the morning papers carried news of the murder of the programming head of the largest state-run news agency, Itar—Tass—stabbed multiple times in his flat while his driver waited outside for three hours before anyone was called.

Regular situation reports kept Hazard at peak readiness to meet whatever challenges their clients’ operating environments presented.

Stevie had started from the ground up. Lawlessness was the problems on the Moscow street—skinhead gangs attacking foreign students of Asian, African or Indian descent was big. Fifteen thugs had attacked an African-American student only the other day, screaming, ‘Blacks out of Russia.’ The boy was bashed in broad daylight, in the centre of town, with hundreds of bystanders. No one stopped them. The Russian security services were so unable (or unwilling) to deal with incidents like this that they were becoming diplomatic incidents. It was a symptom of the greater rot.

These gangs had initially stepped in to provide protection in the vacuum left when the judicial and police institutions of Russia had crumbled. Skinheads had allegedly been called to a town three time zones away to punish a man who had raped a girl. The gang flayed the man alive with razor blades.

Tiger kidnappings were also on the rise: bank managers, truck drivers moving precious cargos, jewellers—anyone who had access to valuables—were snatched and ‘persuaded’ to hand over the goods. Kidnap for ransom was a real risk for anyone who was prominent, and executed by professionals and opportunists alike. Companies doing business in Russia faced the conundrum of bribes—to pay or not to pay—and the risk of violence. Organised crime favoured assassinations as a negotiating tool in their ‘business’.

By 1995, after the fall of the Soviet Union, murder figures had tripled. Organised crime gangs became the most stable, most powerful organisations in Russia. As the country privatised, these groups had the cash to snap up properties. This gave them great economic and political clout.

Forty per cent of KGB members left the organisation and many joined criminal groups, or offered personal protection to oligarchs. They took with them their sophisticated training, specialist knowledge, and powerful weaponry and connections. Organised crime gangs were transformed. By this time, crushing them would have destabilised the fragile nation.

As the country slowly stabilised under the iron grip of the government of the new millennium, the crackdown on the criminal gangs had begun.

The ex-USSR had plenty of other security issues. Military-grade radioactive material had become a hot
commodity. The moment the Soviet Union had collapsed, criminal gangs of all persuasions had descended like hungry maggots on the abandoned nuclear facilities and research labs dotted around the vast territory and stripped them bare. The high levels of secrecy that had surrounded these projects meant that no one quite knew what was taken.

The Americans spent millions trying to help the Russian government secure these facilities, but the thefts kept happening. The fear was that the materials would be trafficked and used by terrorists to make a dirty bomb. Rumours of missing ‘suitcase bombs’—nuclear devices that the KGB had allegedly constructed, small enough to fit in a suitcase—still circulated although none of the missing suitcases had yet been recovered.

Despite the massive wealth of a handful of men, life for ordinary Russians remained unforgivably grim. Looking out onto the city, Stevie felt the weight of all those crushed generations crowded in the cold fog and the streets outside, and wondered how Russians found the energy to keep on going.

Vadim called from Moscow State University, told Stevie to come as quickly as she could. Stevie fastened fourteen buttons on her woollen sailor’s trousers, pulled on her fur-lined black boots and threw her astrakhan over everything. She was starting to get used to these morning calls.

Outside, a pale fog dimmed even the neon signs, shining like artificial suns from the tops of buildings. The thermometer read –41 degrees. It was getting colder. Head down, she made for the nearest metro. It was certainly the quickest way out to MGU—Moscow State University.

The heavy swinging doors at the entrance of the metro station are lethal. You have to time your entry just right—either moving through close behind the person in front, or far enough back from them that the door can complete its thudding back-swing before being pushed forward again.

It was peak hour and body after muffled body streamed through the guillotine doors—headdresses, fur hats, leather caps, woollen beanies, military hats—one after the other were fed in. Stevie knew a crack from the doors could knock her senseless, so she followed right on the heels of a dumpy babushka, knowing from experience that nothing ever got in the way of a babushka.

One, two, three—go!

The metro stations in Moscow are famous for their art deco celebrations of Soviet Glory. Each station has its own design, its own mood. Some are mausoleum-black, plated in heavy marble; others are dedicated to martial glory, overseen by monolithic metal statues of soldiers. Red hammer-and-sickles are studded on the vaulted ceilings in others. In all of them you can sense the power of history hanging over the rush of small men below.

Street life in a Moscow winter happens in these deep and beautiful tunnels. The underground arcades are well heated, with marble floors and carved benches. Young people meet after school, grouping in small knots of two or three or four. Above ground the snow is waist high so meeting in the metro made sense.

Stevie found herself squeezed next to a stout woman in a ginger fur coat and matching hat and hair. In her arms, the woman was carrying a ginger cat, invisible in the fur but for its green eyes and pointed ears. Was the cat afraid of all the fur, she wondered, or did it feel at home? Stevie reached out and secretly touched the woman’s fur. The coat was so soft. The cat glared at her.

The way a crowd moves in an underground train station says a lot about the character of the people trapped within it. Milanese crowds bustle, move quickly, shout, dodge umbrellas, and people move at different speeds. In London, travellers are brisk, polite and silent, all standing carefully to one side in the unspoken understanding that those not moving on the escalator should stand to the left.

In Moscow, the travellers mass at the top of the escalator, waiting their turn to descend to the trains below. As they inch forward, the crowd begins to sway, rhythmically, from one foot to the other like sailors on the deck of a rocking ship.

The babushki are so tightly bound in layers of clothing, scarves and tights that they feel completely solid to the touch, like logs wrapped in felt. They come up behind you and start rocking, propelling themselves forward, unstoppable in their steady, insistent motion that speaks of eternal resignation.

Resignation is different to patience: the latter is sustained by hope, the former has let it go. Waiting was a fact of life—the essence of life—under Soviet communism. The static existence continued for many under the current president as people waited for opportunity.

This eternal state of pause seemed to have created its own collective gesture: the sideways roll. The silence in such a physical crush of people was striking. The crowd was not aggressive. It pushed and surged around Stevie but with no personal grudge, no animosity, and no apology if someone stepped on your foot. As the people in it rock
with slow, grim focus, she was compelled by physical pressure to do likewise.

Stevie’s stomach fluttered as she stepped onto the down escalator. The depth of the tunnel, the incline, was vertiginous. The original stations had been built far underground so they could be used as air-raid shelters, until the arrival of the nuclear age, when people realised that you just couldn’t dig deep enough. The newer stations were much shallower. As she descended into the darkness, Stevie concentrated on the faces rising towards her on the escalator opposite, all so white. It was unusual to see an Asian face or a dark face—a black face rare indeed. No one wore any brightly coloured clothing, no one was laughing or talking.

Two pale boys on military service, conscripts, rose up towards her. They looked so young in their great coats with their soft mouths and apple cheeks. Stevie thought of Vadim’s stories, of the mothers in Red Square screaming for justice.

Stevie doubted it was much easier for any of the girls. She watched two friends in their early twenties, perfectly made-up. It wasn’t yet ten o’clock in the morning but they were drinking beer from big cans. They obviously took great care of their appearance. Beauty was one of the easiest ways out of the life of stagnation offered by the concrete monoliths on Moscow’s outskirts. Stevie thought of the clubs and restaurants and bars, the girls on display in lingerie and heels, part of the wallpaper.

For these young people in particular, their communist past seemed to have been vacuumed away. The present had roared in on a Hummer, past protesting pensioners in shabby clothing, bringing with it a Wild West of neon lights and dirty snow, of assassinations and pounding house music. There was, Stevie supposed, no middle way in Moscow. Everything was extreme.

There was no noise in the train carriage. No one wanted to draw the attention of the other passengers. Life here seemed to be an intensely private and interior matter, to be hidden from strangers—guarded from the state—at all cost. Any social capital Moscow may once have had, long ago, had truly been eroded and none of the developments since the fall of communism had been very effective in restoring any.

Stevie surfaced at Universitet station, past the kiosks selling beer and vodka to morning workers. If anything, the gloom was even more pronounced out here. The avenues of bare trees, the tall wrought-iron fence that ringed the university grounds, stood out black and lean against the snow. There was no colour, only shades of grey fading to black. The whole scene could have been an old photo capturing a lost moment in history.

Anya must have walked this way so many times, on her way to her music lesson. She must have walked through the trees, towards the monolithic university buildings—a central Gotham tower that should have had gargoyles instead of heroic statues and ceremonial urns and would have been more at home in uptown New York, with smaller, twenty-storey wings radiating off it. She would have carried her violin case, her school books, perhaps a snack.

Stevie casually glanced behind her. The feeling was back, even stronger now, that someone was following her. Had that man been in her metro car? Did it mean anything? Did she recognise the blue-grey jacket from GUM? She couldn’t be sure . . .

Stevie hurried towards the university. A tall figure strode out of the main building, past two gigantic bronze statues of a boy and girl made heroic through study, and down the ripple of stairs that ran to the grounds. Coat flapping behind him like a heavy wing-fall, Vadim came to find the woman who might help free his sister.

‘The music rooms are not, unfortunately, located in the main building,’ he said in greeting. ‘They are around the back.’

Stevie and Vadim strode out into the black-and-white park, the only movement in an otherwise frozen landscape. It was exceptionally cold. The blacks were growing blacker, the whites whiter, the greys taking sides.

Dumps of rusting metal, steel containers, corroding beams lined one side of the snowy track—for the neat path by now had become a track. On the other side was the music building. A staircase ran up to the front door on the first floor, but some of the steps were missing and it was obviously not viable. Stevie thought at first that it was an abandoned block, but then she noticed that lights were on and, some of the windows not being boarded and taped, that students were eating at a communal table on the ground floor. Like a threadbare jumper, the concrete was eaten away in patches, exposing a jumble of wires, more beams. Three stray dogs ran about the foreground, obviously starving and manic with cold.

‘It’s not as bad as it looks inside. It’s warm at least.’ Vadim looked down at Stevie puffing along beside him. ‘You’re shocked?’

‘It’s the dogs really, Vadim. They make it all feel so . . . desolate, so deeply forsaken. Is my nose red?’
Vadim smiled. Of course it was.

Inside, the halls were dimly lit, the ceilings a patchwork of waffled squares stained by years of water damage.

‘Anya’s music teacher is a gentle, kind woman,’ Vadim told her. ‘Her name is Galina Alexandreyevna Ovchinnikov. And there is someone else I want you to talk to. She works in the room next door to Galina, a friend of hers. She might have some information that will help us find Anya.’

Galina’s music room had managed, by one of those small miracles that turn up the colours of life for those standing still enough to notice them, to completely reject its surroundings. It smelt of pine—rosin dust from violin bows—of cinnamon biscuits and freshly printed ink. The light was warm with hints of gold around the edges, it bounced from the corners of a highly polished upright piano, the rim of a music stand filled with sheets; the arm of a metronome, trapped behind its clasp, was still.

Galina herself was golden, in her mid-forties, dark-blond hair in a waved bob, greying a little in single strands sketched here and there on her head. She wore a hand-knitted jumper in thick moss-green wool, lovingly embroidered with strawberries. She smiled as Vadim entered, then rose to greet Stevie.

‘I am waiting for a pupil,’ she said, as if apologising for seeming idle. She kissed Vadim hello, and her hazel eyes told Stevie she knew Anya was missing.

With the delicacy of a refined sensibility, Galina intuited why Stevie had come and spared her the awkwardness of having to ask the first question.

‘Anya is exceptionally talented, even amongst my own pupils. But she is at that age—glitter is everything.’ Galina gestured to a small chair next to the piano. ‘Please.’ Stevie turned it to face Galina, who sat back down on her piano stool. ‘She wants to be a model in New York. We had an argument in her last lesson. I told her I couldn’t understand why she would want to kick her musical gift into a corner and show her legs to strangers for money instead. But Anya is starstruck. She says she needs to experience life before she can really play. But I don’t think she ran away. I believe deep down she still wants to be a serious musician.’

‘Did she mention any new friends to you, new people she had met recently?’ Stevie asked.

‘No. Not anyone new.’ Galina frowned. ‘She became very close to Petra this year but they have known each other since they were children.

I don’t think Petra was a good influence on her. Petra’s talent is mediocre at best. She can afford to let it drop for a bit. Anya is in a different league. They both loved to talk about film stars and models, you know, chasing glamour.’

‘Yes, I met Petra and I think I know what you mean.’

Galina took a deep breath, looking down at her fine hands, then back at Stevie. ‘The other influence in her life was a positive one, her godfather, Kirril Marijinski. He is a famous conductor but I think he lives in Zurich now. Something happened, no one really knows, but Kirril left Russia a few years ago and swore he would never return. It’s a great pity.’

Stevie nodded. Irina had mentioned Marijinski. She leaned forward in her chair. ‘Did Anya have any troubles with her parents? Any worries at all?’

Galina shook her head. ‘She was a fortunate daughter to fortunate parents, true, Vadim? They are a close family. They enjoy each other’s company. I don’t know of any problems.’

Vadim was leafing through the music sheets on the stand, his mind elsewhere. ‘Except the modelling thing,’ he said suddenly. ‘My parents weren’t very happy about that.’

‘But what sensible parent would be?’ Galina smiled but she had tears in her eyes. ‘I only hope her dream hasn’t taken her to dark places.’

Vadim unhooked the arm of the metronome and let it swing freely, side to side on its spring. Its ticking kept perfect time for the lament, that saddest of arias, that vibrated on every surface, in every heart, in that tiny music room.

Anya.

There was a pin-board on the wall, a lesson timetable. Galina had her students’ names written in the spaces, one every hour aside from a lunch break at one. Anya Kozkov had two lessons a week, one at three in the afternoon, another at four-thirty. Petra was up there as well. Galina seemed very much in demand.

‘You’ve heard nothing from her since?’ Stevie asked softly.

Galina shook her head in deep regret.
Vadim put his hand on Galina’s shoulder. ‘Is Masha here?’

‘In her room, Vadim.’

There was a second door in Galina’s music room. Vadim knocked.

A voice answered, ‘Da?’

‘Masha, eta Vadim.’

Vadim opened the door and stepped into a room even smaller than the first, a virtual closet, with just enough room to raise an elbow and slide a bow across the bridge of a violin. A minute table stood in the middle—it must have been a side table in a former life—and two folding chairs were drawn up to it.

A tiny woman stood beaming as they walked in. ‘Kak deela, Vadim?’

‘Not too bad, thank you, Masha. This is Stevie Duveen, a friend from Switzerland. Stevie, Masha Ivanovna Osipova.’ Masha and Stevie shook hands.

Stevie was usually by far the smallest at any meeting between adults, but Masha was even smaller. Her hand was like a winter sparrow, all warmth and fragile bones. She wore a red jumper and huge glasses that hung from a gold chain around her neck. Like Galina, she was in her mid-forties but her hair was already iron grey—thick, cut like a steel bowl. But her eyes were a clear sky blue, her skin fine and young.

‘You’re looking for Anya.’ Those limpid eyes were on Stevie now.

For Masha, like Galina, small talk was talk wasted. But Masha had none of the abruptness that people mistake for honesty. Both women in fact, it struck Stevie, were civilised and gentle; working away in their buried cells, they were women in full possession of their human credentials.

‘I never actually saw Anya,’ Masha continued. ‘Of course, I heard her. She came for her violin lessons next door. I knew certainly that it was Anya because there is a lesson schedule in Galina’s room. But I would have been able to tell anyway. The notes from her violin were different from all the others. They had a longing in them, the kind that is full of hope and unfocused desire. Like the heart of a young girl.’ She sat back down, gesturing to the seat opposite her.

‘I told Masha about Anya,’ murmured Vadim, as he pulled out the second chair for Stevie. ‘She was recording my story and it had just happened. I could think of nothing else. I know I wasn’t supposed to speak to anyone but Masha doesn’t know my sister. It was a comfort to tell someone what had happened, how worried I am.’

Stevie turned her head to look into the young man’s tortured face. ‘It doesn’t matter, Vadim. Sorrow is as hard to keep to yourself as happiness. Better you tell someone with no stake in the matter. What were you recording for?’

Stevie saw Masha look to Vadim. Was it for permission?

‘Stevie, I think, would be interested in your book, Masha Ivanovna.’

Masha addressed Stevie. ‘You have been to Russia before I’m guessing, you speak Russian well. Perhaps you have noticed we are sliding slowly towards hell.’

But even as she pronounced her sentence, Masha smiled, showing small, white pointed teeth. Her eyes suggested energy, not defeat.

‘Despite everything I am optimistic. Aggressively so. I try hard to build optimism because pessimism is too easy, too self-fulfilling. It is not a prophecy I want to be responsible for realising. I want instead to create hope, because that is what people live for.’ Masha smiled again, her hand fluttering in an arc. ‘Hope and the trivial, tangible things—things like hot, sweet tea, a piece of gossip, an admiring glance from your husband, maybe a new magazine, birthday parties.’

There was a tiny silver samovar in the corner. Masha stood and went over to fill three glasses of tea. She spooned in enthusiastic amounts of sugar as she continued.

‘Living on a human scale cannot be done on ideas. That was the real flaw of communism. The texture of life was neglected and it became threadbare and joyless. There was never enough of anything and everyone was afraid of everyone else. It ground away at us. Every day was all about the great Rodina—the Motherland. All sacrifices—and there were many—were in her name. For the party members, certainly, there were material benefits—trips overseas, imported shoes, food, anything—that equality was in name only. But for everyone else, the return on everyday sacrifices was supposed to be ideological satisfaction and that is not something you can hold in your hand.’

She passed a glass to Stevie, one to Vadim, and continued. ‘Yes, ideas underpin everything, but they express themselves in the details of our lives and this is how we understand them and consume them. The worst things in the world have been done in the name of ideas divorced from their human consequences.’
Masha sat back down and stirred her tea into a whirlpool, her tiny brass spoon tinkling like a tooth-fairy’s wand.

For such a diminutive woman, thought Stevie, she certainly packed a punch. Her face was familiar, the elfin smile, the eyes behind the big glasses . . . but Stevie couldn’t place it.

‘My project is a drop in the sea, the smallest thing. It is a book.’

Masha paused to blow gently on her tea. ‘In it I record the personal stories of ordinary individuals, the events big and small that have shaped them; I record the feel of their lives. Every time I do that, I feel I am returning just a little of the power and dignity that a monolithic, despotic government takes away from every private life: the right to go quietly about your business, pursue your dreams, build a future free from interference.’

Masha turned her gaze to Stevie. ‘Our country is not a machine and its citizens are not interchangeable, expendable moving parts. Someone needs to remind the powers of that. When you know the details of someone’s story, it is much harder to treat them with contempt.’

‘It’s a bit like humanising yourself to your captors so they won’t kill you,’ Stevie added quickly, having burned the tip of her tongue with the tea. She was inspired by Masha’s energy, felt that she wanted to join her somehow.

‘Perhaps you are right.’ Masha nodded. ‘The president has our whole nation hostage, and others besides. Perhaps he will come to hear of the stories of these simple people and see that they have souls and hopes and people who love them deeply. I believe contempt is what allows leaders to repress and dehumanise and destroy their own people. The concentration camps and the gulags of last century’s history did just that, reduced people to a cipher, stripped them of what it means to be a man or a woman or a child. A number can be erased without a second’s thought.’

Masha could see the Russia around her changing once again. The trauma of the years under the Soviets had been repressed, initially by the euphoria of freedom, now because no one had time to think through what had happened. Disillusionment was setting in.

Many people had become poorer since the Iron Curtain was swept aside and the window of freedom revealed. They resented this, as anyone would. They no longer even had the glorious Soviet Motherland—an empire that stretched from Europe to China, a space programme, one half of the world under its belt—the über myth that had compensated for certain deficiencies in the Soviet system. The myths had turned to ash. The past had been taken from the people; their future was uncertain, the present uncomfortable. Little wonder that racism, distrust, paranoia and rage seemed to be taking hold of Russia.

Masha drained her tea and smiled mischievously. ‘Our history is unpredictable. This is a book of witnesses. I want to remind people of the past, and of who they were, and of the things that happened, to stop them.’

The three of them became aware of a flute being played in Galina’s room; she was accompanying on the piano. Her student must have been a young child, just beginning to learn: the notes were uncertain and imperfect.

‘It’s a Sisyphean task Masha has taken on.’ Vadim was leaning against the wall, half smiling. ‘To restore humanity soul by soul, tale by tale.’

‘But the struggle is part of the victory,’ Masha replied. ‘It will probably take me the rest of my life.’ She grinned, as if this idea pleased rather than daunted her.

Then she grew serious. ‘I told Vadim the other day about another of my subjects, a man named Gregori Petrovitch Maraschenko. He came to me on four occasions and I recorded his story. He was caught in the Moscow theatre siege, when the Chechens took the audience hostage.’ She took a sip of her tea. ‘On the second time, he was early and waiting for me in Galina’s music room. He was reading the lesson timetable. I thought he was just bored, passing time. But then he asked me about Anya Kozkov. I didn’t know her, I told him so. But after that, he always seemed to be listening if she was playing in the next room, trying to hear her conversations with Galina. You can half-hear most things.’ Masha gestured towards the thin wall. ‘I thought maybe he had some fascination. On the last day Anya and Galina were arguing . . . She wanted to be a fashion model.’

Their voices would have been raised, Stevie thought, and Petra’s name would have come up. She could see how easily the argument might have been overheard in this tiny room, with its paper walls.

‘I should have warned Anya.’ Masha’s eyes were still on Vadim. ‘In fact, after this last time, I decided I would speak to Galina so that she could warn Anya. It would be better coming from her.’

‘But there was never a next time?’ Stevie asked, guessing the answer.
‘No. Gregori never came back. I tried to ring him but the number was no longer in use. I thought it strange. He seemed to enjoy our sessions. But I didn’t think too much of it until Vadim came and he told me about his sister being missing. I wondered if the two disappearances were connected.’

Stevie frowned. ‘It sounds possible. How did you find Gregori?’

‘I put a small ad in the paper, for people with interesting stories they wanted to tell, in exchange for sweet tea and biscuits, for a book about Russia. I was quite overwhelmed with replies. I didn’t expect that.’ Masha shrugged. ‘But perhaps the longing to tell one’s story remains one of the most basic in humans.’

Stevie nodded. ‘And then you whittled it down, I presume, to the most interesting among them.’

‘Yes, it was a difficult process and I wanted to choose very different stories. But I chose Gregori because of the Nord—Ost theatre siege.’

The flute in the next room stopped. Galina’s voice, only faintly muffled, came through the walls—a correction of the flautist’s finger position, a gentle word of encouragement.

Stevie considered the new information. ‘It doesn’t sound like Gregori contacting you was premeditated. He couldn’t have known that Anya Kozkov was having music lessons in the next room to where you would be working.’

‘Impossible.’

‘So if he is involved, it was an opportunistic involvement. Either he set something in motion on impulse, or he sold his information. Is there anything on those tapes that might help us?’

Masha stood, shaking her head. ‘I’ve been thinking, but I can’t remember anything specific . . .’

‘They might be worth listening to anyway.’

Masha bent and pulled open a drawer. It was full of cassette boxes, all neatly labelled and stacked. She picked one out and opened it. Her little hand fluttered to her mouth.

She reached for another, opened it, then another. They were all empty.

‘Oh Vadim.’ Masha looked up, her eyes filling with tears. ‘I’m so sorry. Gregori’s tapes are gone. He must have taken them the last time he was here, when I left the room. I never bothered to hide where I kept them. There seemed no reason to.’

‘It seems like a pretty good sign of guilt!’ Vadim had his fists clenched at his sides.

Masha fumbled about in another drawer then pulled out another cassette box.

‘It’s the best I can do. It was a test—to see if my machine was working.’ She popped the tape in the cassette player and there was a hissing, followed by Masha’s voice: Odin, dva, tri. Pozhaluista, skajite svaye imya. Please say your name.

Then a male voice, deep, tinny from the magnetic ribbon: Gregori Petrovitch Maraschenko; biznessman.

Masha rewound and played it again: Gregori Petrovitch Maraschenko; biznessman.

Stevie made her play it again, and again, until she felt she would know that voice anywhere.

‘Masha, how do we find Gregori Petrovitch?’

‘I think you should try The Boar. It’s a bar. He once told me he goes there on Thursday evenings, to drink away the memories. He’s hard to miss: he has a tattoo of a grinning cat on his left wrist.’

A thief’s tattoo, thought Stevie.

Suddenly, she remembered where she had seen Masha’s face: a television news broadcast from outside the House of Culture of the State Ball-Bearing Plant Number 1 in the Dubrovka area, a Moscow theatre. On 24 October 2002, the day after the Chechen gunmen took the audience hostage, the gunmen had asked for Masha to be their intermediary with the Russian government. They would only talk to her. She was a famous journalist and was known to have some sympathy for the Chechen people. Masha had walked into the captured theatre alone to negotiate with the gunmen.

Stevie remembered an interview, the resignation in Masha’s voice when she had summed up her efforts: ‘All I could get for the hostages was apple juice.’

It had been an incredibly brave thing to do.

As they got up to leave, they heard Galina begin to play—it had to be Galina, no young pupil could have mustered the same depth of feeling. She was incredible.

Galina stopped playing as they passed through her music room. She turned her large eyes to Stevie.
‘I’ve lost one child already. Please, I couldn’t bear to lose Anya as well.’
Stevie and Vadim crept their way back past the wild dogs in the snow outside.

‘I wouldn’t have thought to find two women like that in such a place, Vadim. I am quite in awe of them both.’

Vadim smiled and took Stevie’s arm to steady her. ‘Galina’s family is from St Petersburg. Her grandfather was a lawyer at the Leningrad State and Law Institute. Almost everyone there was killed and the institute was closed. They needed to destroy the law to create lawlessness. Every night black vans would stop in front of people’s apartments. People called them chyornye voroni, black ravens. One night a black raven came for Galina’s grandfather. He disappeared into the NKVD cellars at 4 Liteiny Prospekt.’

Vadim stopped to pick up a thick stick of wood. One of the dogs seemed intent on following them.

‘Yezhovshchina,’ Stevie whispered, ‘the Great Terror.’

Stevie remembered the terrible numbers: between 5 August, 1937 and 16 November 1938, 39,488 enemies of the people were executed in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) alone. Their bodies were thrown into mass graves. The NKVD was the predecessor of the KGB. The Chief, Nikolia Yezhov, was one of the men who began the campaign of terror. Typical execution style was a bullet from a .45 calibre Colt, fired into the nape of the neck.

‘After the raven took Galina’s grandfather,’ Vadim continued, ‘the family went down to the river Neva. There was a pipe that ran to it from the NKVD cellars. Some days the water in that spot ran red with the blood washed down from the executed. Galina’s family didn’t know whose blood was staining the river that day, but they threw flowers into the Neva anyway and said goodbye.’

Their feet crunched on through the snow. Stevie kept glancing over her shoulder at the hungry dog. He looked a little crazed, his tongue hanging out. She was glad to have Vadim with her. He went on with his story unperturbed.

‘Galina then lost one of her sons in Chechnya. A rocket attack, the military said. Could have been anything. She only ever got half of Alyosha’s body back.’

‘Poor Galina.’

‘And Masha.’ Vadim looked down at Stevie. ‘Her son was seven years old when he first looked under the family car for a bomb.’

As they walked on through the snowy ruins, Stevie thought about the staggering load that had been brought to bear on the people of Russia, and how it had crushed down with the weight of eternity, ground them into gunpowder and sand, and about how that same pressure produced, every now and then, a diamond of extraordinary brilliance.

They reached the university gates and stopped. Vadim let go of Stevie’s arm.

‘You are safe from the dogs here. They won’t follow you outside the grounds.’

But was she safe from whoever she was sure was following her?

Vadim hurled his stick into the trees. ‘I can’t get that man’s voice out of my head,’ he confessed to Stevie. ‘I wanted to crawl into that tape machine and break his throat.’

‘We’ll find him, Vadim.’

‘It seems crazy that we know what his voice sounds like, and who he is, and yet . . .’

‘It’s not certain that Gregori Maraschenko took Anya.’ Stevie was suddenly worried Vadim might do something rash.

‘No? Looks pretty likely to me.’

Stevie could only agree with silence.

As if he could read her thoughts, Vadim leaned in and kissed her cheeks. ‘I won’t do anything. Don’t worry.’

Stevie wanted to say something reassuring but managed only an enormous sneeze, then another. Her eyes were streaming. Vadim considered her, head cocked to one side. ‘You need gorchichniki, mustard pads—you stick them to the soles of your feet and to your kidneys. Trust me. They’re the only thing that works.’

The security guard at the pharmacy door (this was Moscow) scowled at her. Inside, there were three windows with a pharmacist—like tellers at an old-fashioned bank—long queues in front of each. Stevie joined the shortest.

The customers were all old, or old before their time, bundled and wrapped and swaddled to the point of impaired mobility, their faces incurious and impenetrable. No one spoke. Finally, it was Stevie’s turn at the window.

A stocky young woman in a white coat looked up. ‘Gavaritye. ’ Speak.
Stevie asked politely: ‘Izvinite pozhaluista, I need some gorchichniki.’

The pharmacist just looked at her blankly. Nothing. Stevie tried again, more in the pharmacist’s style, ‘Gorchichniki!

’ This time there was the slightest relaxation deep in the rigid cognitive functions of the pharmacist’s brain.

‘Ah, Gorchichniki!

’ Stevie knew her Russian pronunciation was not good, but she could have sworn there could have been only the smallest difference in her version of gorchichniki, such as might have been produced by an old man with loose dentures, say, or a swaddled babushka mumbling through her layers. The pharmacist pointed to the window next to hers and proceeded to read her papers.

Stevie, burning with frustration, went to the back of another queue and waited. She had been there twenty minutes already. The elderly had played a vital role in the Era of the Long Queue. Looking around, Stevie wondered if some of them missed the days when they had been indispensable, and the respect that came with that. It appeared that perhaps, in this pharmacy at least, those days were not quite over.

Shifting her weight from foot to foot, Stevie tried to harvest patience from the most barren of fields.

The same conversation was waiting for her.

‘Gavaritye.

’ ‘Gorchichniki.’ The pharmacist stared at her with deep suspicion.

Stevie scowled back, refusing to smile. The woman pointed to the third window. Stevie could see the packet, a yellow-and-red box, just within the pharmacist’s reach. This was too much. Quite aside from the time it had taken her so far, and the sheer perversity of the pharmacists and their system, Stevie had her dignity. A stand had to be taken.

Stevie assumed the expression of a brick.

‘Gorchichniki.’

The pharmacist pointed. Stevie repeated her request. A psy-ops guy had told her once that asking the same question over and over again was the quickest way to getting what you wanted. Stevie betrayed no impatience, no anger, only her brick face. She prepared her final assault on the pharmacist’s obstinacy.

‘Gorchichniki.’ The pharmacist crumbled and finally reached for the yellow-and-red box. Stevie all but danced away in victory, and walked smack bang into the swinging door.

She felt her tooth slice into her soft bottom lip, knew it would hurt in a millisecond, bleed into her mouth. But there was no question of stopping. The pharmacist could be watching. So she launched herself into the street, hoping the cold would numb everything, including her embarrassment.

Stevie surfaced like a penguin from under the ice and snow. The warmth of the metro car had brought on a throbbing of her damaged lower lip. She was tired and her head was heavy, aching; she would have liked maybe to cry a little. But Masha wouldn’t cry. This was exactly why she, Stevie Duveen, would never be heroic.

Heroes didn’t cry because they walked into a door; heroes struggled against evil, not pharmacists. In the end though, Stevie thought, even if you couldn’t be a hero, you could certainly try to be a part of the solution rather than part of the problem. This, she felt, was perhaps a more manageable expectation, considering her temperament.

Coward.

There was a car park right in front of the station. A black 4WD sat idling, its exhaust pipe steaming, tail-lights turning the snow around it a festive red. The windows were completely tinted, as opaque as the doors. Stevie noticed it from the corner of her vision: the sort of vehicle to stay away from.

She began to scurry, rapid small steps like a cockroach. It was a gait that, in her experience, usually discouraged all approach. There were a few other people about puffing steam; Stevie could see two mil-itzia strolling through the car lot and this time the sight of them was comforting rather than unnerving.

There was nothing to be afraid of, she told herself. It was just a car waiting for a parking spot. But there were plenty of vacant spaces. It was obviously waiting for somebody to come out of the metro station, it was too cold to walk home. But Stevie couldn’t help it. She was nervous, and she had made an inconvenient bargain with herself a long time ago that she would always trust her instincts over reason.

There were no shops to duck into and the metro was now quite far behind her. Stevie scanned the area. About a hundred metres ahead was a large intersection, people, some restaurants, safety. The car park ended with a wall about twenty metres before the intersection. The car would not be able to proceed further, the intersection was the
best bet for safety.

Two men walking ahead of her stopped to light cigarettes. One laughed and slapped his friend on the shoulder. Behind her, a babushka built like a bear toddled along carrying heavy shopping bags. Stevie slowed her pace so the old woman could come closer and felt a little safer.

The 4WD started crawling along behind her. Stevie could hear it, feel it at her shoulder like some malevolent bird of prey. Faster she scurried; faster crawled the black car, speeding up. Stevie was frightened now.

Had Kozkov’s enemies come after her?

Stevie and the babushka were maybe five metres from the men when the 4WD pulled up alongside. The front window lowered all the way down.

There was a man in the passenger seat, shaven head, fat gold chain, leather overcoat and a tattoo creeping up his thick neck. There were others in the car. Stevie couldn’t help but look at him, and he looked right back at her. She saw he had a mouth full of gold teeth. The tip of a handgun was resting on the door.

The thug raised the gun to the height of Stevie’s head and jerked it sideways twice, as if urging her back. The babushka saw the gun, cried out and skidded on the ice, slammed into Stevie, knocking her to the ground. Four shots rang out. Tyres screeched, filthy grey snow sprayed out over her. The 4WD reversed through the parking lot at speed, spun around and disappeared off down the main road. The two men ahead lay dead.

Stevie didn’t dare get up yet, but she turned her head slowly to get a clear view. The two militzia had seen the whole thing from the other side of the parking lot. They remained standing there. One was talking into a radio. Neither looked in a particular hurry to get involved.

Stevie stood cautiously and made herself walk up to the two bodies. The babushka who had knocked her over had disappeared.

One victim was in his forties, the other much younger. They seemed to be of average means—strong cheap shoes, clean hands, gold rings on the older man—unremarkable in any way. Stevie removed her right glove, then knelt over the older man and checked for a pulse below the ear. The skin was warm and soft to her touch but there was no pulse. A neat bullet hole above the ear was visible. Unsurvivable. The other man had fared no better: no pulse, a wound in the cheek, the forehead and the neck—a disorganised cluster of bullet holes, but effective nonetheless.

Blood was pooling in the snow, spreading through the ice crystals to form a huge stain like a big red balloon, floating over the heads of the victims. As much as Stevie wanted to flee, she had seen the assassin’s face and it was her duty to describe it to the militzia.

A pair of tiny babushki hurried past the bodies without even giving them a second glance. The men were obviously not sleeping there on the street, but the old women’s studied incuriosity came from a long history of lessons in self-preservation: see nothing.

The two militzia men sauntered over and stood over the bodies. They took no notice of Stevie.

‘I saw the man who did it, bald with tattoos on his neck. He had gold teeth,’ she told them.

The policemen stared at Stevie, then went back to looking at the bodies. One bent down and began to search the older man’s pockets. He pulled out a wallet with an identity card. The wallet was empty. The policeman tossed it to the ground.

‘If you need a statement, I’m staying at the Metropole.’

One militzia made a hissing noise, jerked his head twice at Stevie, just like the thug had with his gun. Get out of here, the gesture said, this is not your business.

Stevie was only too happy to oblige and she resumed her scurry down the boulevard, into the fading frozen light, her cut lip forgotten.

Back at her hotel, Stevie called down for a bucket of ice. As she went to replace the telephone receiver, her hands began to shake so violently that it took her several attempts to sit it back in its cradle.

In her mind, she saw the small flecks of brain sitting on snow crystals; the neat bullet hole encircled by singed skin; she remembered the smell of gunpowder and exhaust fumes; the taste of fear like metallic electricity in her mouth. Bile rose in her throat but she fought it down and was not sick.

Pull yourself together, Stevie, for goodness sake. You have to be stronger than this.
Considering the adventures of the day, Stevie thought a medicinal afternoon cocktail would not be inappropriate. Not wanting to be alone, she decided on the Metropole bar.

**She floated in, having changed** into an emerald-green silk kimono coat covered in birds of paradise, small gold birdcages hanging from her earlobes, and ordered a Brandy Crusta. It was a good drink for dealing with death: brandy, cream and brown sugar on the rim of the glass. Her grandmother’s friends served them at wakes.

A small television was on behind the bar. Stevie fixed on it, hoping to distract herself from the vivid blood balloon in her thoughts. It was broadcasting a story about Sokolniki Park. The park at this time of year was virtually abandoned, the fun fair, under tarpaulin drapes, sad as only once-happy places can be.

During the Cold War it had been a famous meeting place for spies and their sources. People thought that had all ended with the thaw, but the activity, if anything, had intensified. Only a few months ago, the British secret service had been discovered planting fake rocks under park benches in Sokolniki. These plastic rocks contained transmitters that could either scramble and send information in lightning bursts (therefore reducing the chances of interception) or record nearby conversations. It had been a major gaffe, a source of much amusement among Muscovites. Children had hunted the park for the plastic rocks and jokes grew up in bars: ‘Ssh, the rocks might hear you’ was particularly funny after a few drinks.

Stevie placed a cigarette carefully between her damaged lips and reached for the matches, but her fingers were still shaking and she put the box down. Instead, she concentrated on a breathing technique she’d learned on one of her training courses. It was designed to calm the central nervous system.

A news programme was starting. Stevie held her breath, but there was nothing at all about the shooting. Perhaps it was too soon, but news crews were usually pretty good at sniffing out crimes as visually arresting as the one she had witnessed. There was nothing about Anya Kozkov on the news, not about a disappearance—nor a body, Stevie forced herself to add.

Perhaps she had been paranoid to think the 4WD was after her, but at least her instincts were still working: the car had been trouble. What would have happened if she had been shot as well? Gunned down on the street like the two men? Would *militzia* have rifled her pockets and left the body lying in a red lake? And how would David Rice have reacted when told Stevie Duveen had been shot dead on a Moscow street?

It was so easy to fall through the cracks of life. Or be pushed.

Would news of her death have made it to Switzerland, or would she just have disappeared into the Moscow city morgue, to lie in a steel tomb unclaimed?

What mattered in the end, Stevie supposed, was that someone remembered that you had existed. A memory was everyone’s legacy, the small consolation of the dying. The ancient Romans had understood how important remembrance was. It was they who passed *damnatio memoriae*, the extreme form of dishonour, which ‘removed from remembrance’ the traitor who had shamed the Roman State. Every trace of the condemned man’s life was erased, cancelled, wiped out, as if he had never existed.

*We all do it, erase our ex-lover’s phone number, tear up photos, forbid the mention of his name.*

Stevie was trying very hard to bury Joss Carey in the deepest *oubliette* she could find, hoping he would quietly starve . . .

The Soviets, like the Romans, had eliminated people from public memory. It was the ultimate death. Stalin had had all his opponents during the Great Purge removed from history books, and had them doctored out of photographs. Children were instructed to scratch out the faces of ‘traitors’ in their school textbooks as a gesture of patriotism and loyalty.

Now, as then, history was under strict Kremlin control. To record another version of events was an act of rebellion, even revolution. It was to refuse to forget; it was to dignify a life—lives—with acknowledgement. That was what Masha was trying to do.

Coming out of this reverie, Stevie suddenly noticed a tall man watching her from the shadows. He was smoking a Turkish cigarette—she could smell the tobacco. The man moved towards her, letting his herringbone overcoat slide from its hook on the left shoulder into his hand.

‘Been fighting?’ Henning’s tone was light but his eyes were anxious as he kissed her on each cheek.

Stevie smiled and gestured with her eyelashes at the spare chair.

‘Something like that.’

Henning sat, crossing his long legs. ‘Don’t tell me you’re drinking chocolate milk.’
‘Brandy Crustas.’
‘I thought only grannies drank those,’ he teased.
Stevie took a long sip of her brandy, her eyes avoiding his. ‘Have you forgotten what I’m like already?’
‘Quite the contrary, Stevie, quite the contrary.’ Henning leaned back in his chair, all trace of mirth disappearing.
‘What I had forgotten—almost forgotten, and unforgivably—is how fragile you look, how like a robin, all throat, fluttering fingers, huge eyes. Standing over there, watching you, I had a sudden urge to trap you in the hollow of my hands and blow gently on your feathers.’
Stevie flushed, turning the stem of her glass in her fingers. She didn’t quite know how to respond. She changed the subject. ‘I watched two men die in a drive-by shooting today. That’s why I’m having a brandy.’
‘Are you alright?’ Henning’s eyes were inspecting her mouth now.
‘What happened?’
Stevie touched her lip. ‘I walked into a glass door—I’m fine. But I thought the shooters were after me.’ Stevie grimaced, embarrassed.
‘Stupid of me. And I’m still shaking. I can’t even light—’ she raised her box of matches in one pale hand.
Henning leaned over and took the trembling hand firmly in his, box and all; with his free hand he produced a lighter and lit Stevie’s cigarette.
He did not let go and her hand remained trapped in his. ‘I want to protect you, Stevie. Does that sound terribly old-fashioned?’
Stevie drew deeply on her cigarette. ‘Protecting people is my job, Henning.’ She exhaled carefully. ‘You do see the irony?’ He smiled, but it quickly faded.
‘I’m so sorry about today, about not being here.’ He would not look away. Stevie grew awkward under the scrutiny and tried to disconnect her hand. Henning kissed it quickly and easily, then relinquished it.
The fingers were squashed white; Stevie rubbed them pointedly.
‘It appears I don’t know my own strength,’ Henning apologised, then added softly, ‘nor the strength of my feelings.’
Stevie swallowed hard, her pulse rising in her ears. ‘My heart is not a rubber ball, Henning,’ she began, her voice shaking. ‘It doesn’t bounce when it’s dropped. It’s more fragile than that.’ She shook her head, staring in her lap. ‘Joss—’ Her words stopped, ‘I can’t . . .’ she tried again. Still the words refused to come. Exhausted, she raised her face, composed now. ‘This is not for now,’ she said firmly.
Henning considered her words. ‘You’re right,’ he announced, and signalled the waiter. ‘A whisky, if you would be so kind.’ He faced back to Stevie. ‘Still,’ he went on, ‘it remains that I’ve put you in horrible danger.’
‘Don’t be silly.’ Stevie shook her head. ‘I’m fine. The shooters weren’t after me. It was bad timing that I was there.’
Stevie filled him in on everything that had happened since he’d left for Istanbul, including Gregori Maraschenko and ending with the shooting.
Henning’s eyes grew dark. For a second, he remained frozen, his blue eyes tight with worry, then he broke into a smile. ‘So, what are you scheming, sitting here all alone?’
‘How to hunt a suspected kidnapper in a disreputable bar without drawing attention to myself.’ Stevie glanced at Henning. ‘Ourselves. Today is Thursday. Masha said Maraschenko goes to The Boar on Thursday evenings. But we’ll have to be circumspect. No bright colours.’
Henning looked at their reflection in the large, gold-framed mirror suspended on the wall: Stevie, tiny as a doll in her wildly printed silk; he, so tall beside her. It would be hard for the two of them to go anywhere unremarked.
He nodded gravely. ‘Of course.’
Stevie put out her cigarette. ‘How was Istanbul?’
‘Foggy.’
‘I want to hear more about this secret language of flowers,’ she said brightly. ‘All I can see in my mind is blood seeping through snow.’
‘Well,’ Henning considered where to begin, ‘flowers are the opposite of indifference. Lovers and mourners all over the world have figured this out. If you want to show something matters to you, you give flowers. In nature, flowers are expressions of fertility, of the order of the natural world. They lie like unread books in a library. It is
once they’re picked and given to someone—or laid down in their memory—that they become messages, manifestations of desire and emotions and unspoken words. And yet,’ his eyes twinkled with mischief, ‘the flowery messages remain indecipherable to those who aren’t meant to read them.’ Henning’s whisky arrived in a crystal glass and he raised it silently to Stevie.

‘You can see how flowers lent themselves perfectly to the job of lovers’ codes in the Turkish harem.’

‘What about these flowers then, the ones on our table?’ Stevie gestured to the small vase with its spray of uninspiring hothouse flowers. ‘What are they saying?’

‘Ah, but you see, those flowers haven’t been given to us.’ Henning picked a piece of fern from the arrangement.

‘If the waiter had come over and handed you the vase with the flowers, it would be different. There would have been a message, an intention. Flowers are offered instead of words. They say the unspoken. That is what is beautiful about them, the subtlety of the message.’

‘People send flowers with cards,’ Stevie reminded him.

‘They do.’ Henning nodded. ‘But the cards may not convey the intention of the flowers at all; words are clumsy, people are timid, they say less rather than more.’ Henning put his glass down on the table. ‘Think of the man who will send flowers to a woman he is pining for. It’s her birthday. He sends an enormous arrangement of roses. The card reads simply, “Happy Birthday. John.” Which message is the true one? “Happy Birthday. John” or the passion of three dozen red roses?’

‘But surely it can’t have been that obvious?’ Stevie remained sceptical. ‘The sultan and his eunuchs would get a bit suspicious if bunches of elaborate red roses were being delivered to some harem beauty on a regular basis.’

Henning’s lips twitched with amusement. ‘They had many, many different flowers and each one was given a meaning, or a narrow range of meanings. The lovers would arrange small posies, bouquets, that conveyed a particular message: “I burn for you”, or “meet me”, or “we are being watched”, or—’ here, Henning’s voice softened—’ “I admire you from afar”.’

‘What if,’ Stevie’s green eyes narrowed, ‘you wanted to declare that you were suspicious of someone’s intentions?’

Henning’s face split into a grin. ‘Then you would send mushrooms.’

Stevie laughed. ‘How elegant.’

‘The beauty of the secret language of flowers lies in utter deniability.’ Henning picked a small white rose from the table vase and held it out to Stevie. ‘You see? It’s just a rose. It’s pretty. Lightly scented. I thought it might please you. Nothing more.’

Stevie examined Henning. There was no denying his amusement. Was she falling into a trap? She took the rose without saying a word. Laid it on the table.

She paused. ‘Henning, what would a primrose mean, in this code?’

Henning gave it some thought. ‘If I’m not mistaken, it declares inconstancy.’

So. It was simple. Stevie had failed to read the signs. Joss Carey’s intentions had been telegraphed well ahead of time, even unbeknownst to him. Well, she knew better now than to give anyone the chance to make a fool of her heart again. No matter how charming, nor how tall.

**Stevie and Henning stepped outside** into the icy night.

‘I still think we should have taken a hotel car, Stevie.’

‘It would hardly be discreet, turning up at a seedy bar in a chauffeured Mercedes. We want to blend in.’

Henning stopped and looked somewhat sceptically at his companion. Stevie was wearing a huge fox fur aviator’s hat and an ankle-length double-breasted navy coat with brass buttons. ‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘we’ll take a Moscow taxi.’

Moscow had so few proper taxis that the easiest way to get around was to hail any car on the street, hop in, name your destination and agree on a fee. This system worked pretty well. The fees were generally well established; the driver would take you as close as was convenient to your destination.

Henning stepped into the icy slush and stuck his arm out. A small black car swayed over from the other side of the road and stopped at the curb. Stevie jumped into the back, Henning in the front.

‘Dobri vyecher!’

Off they went, into the Moscow night. The driver was young, his face doughy, and the car was fogged with
cigarette smoke. Stevie could smell beer and worse. Yes, he knew the bar—no problem—and turned up the volume on the stereo. Wild Russian techno pounded through the speakers. Satisfied, the driver accelerated and they scudded off through the streets.

At a set of lights, a Hummer idled beside them, its rear bumper crusted with filthy snow. Stevie tried to see the passengers but it was impossible through the black glass.

Suddenly, there were three sharp metallic taps at the driver’s window, and the tip of a submachine gun. A face leaned in. Militzia. The driver rolled the window down and inch an a half.

‘Papers!’

‘A minute.’ The driver pulled out his papers and a wad of roubles. Small denominations. He slid these carefully through the crack in the window. The roubles vanished into the policeman’s padded jacket. He slid the documents back through the opening.

‘Spasiba,’ said the driver and rolled the window back up, quick as a fish.

‘If they smell the beer, they want three times as much,’ the driver complained to Henning as the lights changed. ‘It can get very expensive.’

The cheap tyres spun on the ice then carried them forward with a lurch.

The Boar was dark and fetid: a cavernous room with long trestle tables, a bar down the length of the right side, and a small dance floor at the back. It felt like an ugly beer hall. Stevie and Henning headed for the bar and ordered two beers. The barman served them in tankards bigger than Stevie’s head.

Henning gallantly helped Stevie up onto the high stool and handed her a tankard. He smiled at her. ‘I think that just about completes the picture.’

The place wasn’t very busy yet. Small clusters of three and four, couples, a few women dancing joylessly on their own near the speakers at the back of the room. Many of the customers and all of the dancing women were black, unusual for Russia.

Stevie took a sip of her beer. ‘I asked around; some friends know this place quite well.’

‘The Italians?’ Henning raised an eyebrow.

‘Brazilians. You know foreigners, they often see more than people who are from the city. Anyway, the Brazilians said that The Boar is a favourite with slimy middle-aged ex-patriots, lots of Armenians and Cypriots and Nigerians. The bar started as a “prostitute-free zone”, they were banned from operating here. But then the owner’s “roof”—the guy he pays protection to—insisted he allow them in. The roof gets a cut from the pimps too, so it’s very profitable for him. But the compromise was that the girls were not to approach the clients.’

‘Hence the dancing.’ Henning nodded towards the girls by the speakers.

‘I’m guessing, yes.’

The room darkened a little more. A huge picture of wolves running, slavering, through snow was projected above the trestle tables, covering the whole wall. The fangs of the first wolf were the size of Stevie’s forearm.

‘Most of the girls here are Senegalese,’ Stevie murmured over her tankard of beer. ‘ Trafficked into prostitution.’

When Marcus the Brazilian had told Stevie this over the phone, it had been just another grim statistic of Moscow life. But now, saying those words aloud to Henning, here in the bar surrounded by the girls, seeing their faces, the statistic took on a whole new horror.

Stevie searched their faces for a clue or a sign of their desperation, something, but they showed nothing. She watched a young girl in a canary yellow top—sleeveless and tight—dancing alone by the bar. What must life be for her? Trapped in a foreign country buried in snow, not speaking the language, forced to go to bed with all these strange men, the moustaches, the cheap suits, the wiry hair and cigars, the overpowering aftershave Stevie could smell from where she sat.

Perhaps one or two would be kind. She guessed most would not care a moment for the girl whose body was giving them so much pleasure. Until they came, they owned the canary girl. Then it would be back to selling radiator grills or gaskets or anti-freeze, endless bad hotels in small-town Russia.

The men’s buyers in turn wouldn’t spare a thought for all the lonely nights, the boredom or the ugliness of the gasket-seller’s life on the road. They would just complain about the existing order, place a new one and move on. So the cycle of indifference continued. It was easier to pretend other people didn’t exist.
There was a smash at the end of the bar. A man careened like a skittle into the bar stools, reeling from a punch in the face. His beer glass shattered on the concrete floor. Skittle man picked up the glass handle, now a jagged weapon, and hurled himself at the man who had hit him. Stevie saw blood. Strangely, neither man made a noise; there was only the sound of smashing furniture and the shouts of the barman.

The customers had turned their eyes to the fight but even this seemed not to touch them, to bore them even. The bouncer stepped in and smashed both men with his massive fist then threw them, bleeding, out the door. He wore knuckledusters.

‘The bouncer’s been to prison. Did you see the tattoos on his hands?’ Stevie murmured to Henning.

Henning glanced over his shoulder then gave her a slight frown.

‘And you can tell he got them in prison?’

Stevie nodded. ‘There’s a whole tattoo language among the Russian criminals. They cover their bodies in code. It’s their way of declaring things about themselves to other criminals, like their status. It’s a tradition that goes way back into the 1920s and 30s, into Stalin’s gulags.

That scarab with the cross on the middle finger means “convicted for robbery”, and the eagle on the thumb means “I am an important thief”.

‘A secret language,’ Henning spoke slowly, ‘only with meanings quite unlike the harem flowers, I imagine.’

‘Quite.’ Stevie took a long sip from her enormous beer and carefully removed the foam moustache it left on her upper lip. ‘Some of the tattoos are pornographic, especially the ones forcefully applied to someone as punishment. But there are recurring symbols and themes, mostly animal: the head that’s half cat, half horned werewolf; or half man, half cat; a skull with eagle wings; a devil with wolf’s ears, and so on.’ She placed the heavy glass back on the bar. ‘The werewolf is at the heart of it all, being a creature that dwells between worlds: man and animal, night and day, living and dead.’

She dipped her finger in a puddle of beer on the bar and absentmindedly drew the outline of a snarling wolf’s head. ‘The raven, the bat, the cat and the wolf are also symbols of the werewolf.’

Henning was deep in thought. ‘Nocturnal beast, predator, devil and man, twilight dweller. I can see the symbolism. I suppose prison is limbo, no place and yet their place.’ He laughed unexpectedly. ‘And you know all this from your time in the Moscow underworld?’

Stevie straightened her shoulders. ‘I happen to own an encyclopaedia of criminal tattoos—both volumes,’ she added, a little defensively.

She scanned the crowd. It was getting warm in the bar. Several men had rolled their sleeves up, one or two had taken their shirts off, which Stevie considered a little excessive for the hours before midnight.

She spotted a skinny man with a wormwood face. He headed to the bar, then settled himself one man up from Stevie. His forearm had a large tattoo of half a wolf’s head and half a woman’s head, with a dagger dividing the two. A cobra was coiled around the handle and there were roman letters on the top and bottom.

Stevie nudged Henning. ‘Can you read those letters? What do they say?’

Henning shot a surreptitious glance over Stevie’s shoulder. ‘Homo homini lupus est. Gnothi seauton.’

‘“Man is wolf to man”’, Stevie muttered. ‘I got the Latin, what’s the other?’

‘Greek. “Know thyself”.’

Stevie edged imperceptibly further from the wolf man. ‘At least he’s not operating under any delusions,’ she whispered.

Then an extraordinary woman appeared. She was dressed in the tightest blue denim—matching jeans and jacket—stamped all over with Dior. She carried a gold evening bag on a chain.

The woman’s hair was an impossible red and arranged in ringlets that bounced with every painful step of her stiletto boots, the heels of which were so high she pitched forward, her knees pigeon-toed. The barman hurried to kiss her powdered cheeks, light her cigarette and pour her a drink. She received his attentions as she had received those of the bouncer, with long-suffering acceptance that she would have to be so openly adored wherever she went.

Two men came in after her. One bent to kiss her, his eyes closed in tenderness. The face under the ringlets never softened. For a man with such visibly rough hands, he caressed the woman’s back with great gentleness. Under his fur-trimmed hat was the face of someone who had seen little of that gentleness himself.

Stevie strained to catch his companion’s face. As he called an order to the barman Stevie started in shock. The tattooed neck, the mouth full of gold teeth . . .
Stevie didn’t move quickly. She turned languidly towards Henning, then pulled out a cigarette.

‘Henning—’ She realised her fingers were shaking and put the cigarette back. ‘You won’t believe this. It’s the shooter from the car park.’

Henning kept his eyes on the canary girl. ‘Where?’ he hissed.

‘Behind me. Bald. Your three o’clock.’

Stevie’s face prickled with fear, even though the shooter wasn’t interested in her. If he wanted to kill random women he would have shot her that afternoon. But his reappearance at the bar reminded her how connected the world really was. It was easy to forget, she thought. Worlds seem to separate us from the Russian hit man, the war lord, the rapist, the suffering prostitute . . . but really—she swung her feet nervously— we are all closer to each other than we think.

The shooter’s companion shouted at the barman for a beer. Stevie froze. She knew that voice. It had played over in her head since that meeting with Masha in the music rooms: Gregori Petrovitch Maraschenko; biznessman.

Goldie’s companion placed his hands on the bar. There, plain for all to see, was a tattoo of a grinning cat smoking a pipe.

Stevie casually took out her mobile, turned her face away from Maraschenko and spoke into the phone, carefully photographing his face over her shoulder with the tiny camera lens on the back. It was dark but he wasn’t far away and it was worth a try.

She sent the photo straight to Josie Wang in Confidential Investigations at Hazard, with the message: Can you identify asap?

Josie always worked late and if there was anything on record for Maraschenko, she would find it.

The bar began filling with people. A man with a blond handlebar moustache joined Maraschenko. Stevie’s seeking ears caught part of their conversation.

‘—so many damn Nigerians in this city!’

‘Nigeria and Russia—the two biggest money-laundering countries in the world.’

‘Ha!’

The moustachioed man spat on the floor. Stevie suspected he resented being twinned in any way with Africa.

It was odd—you didn’t see the Nigerians during the day. You wouldn’t know they were in Moscow at all. But in the safety of the black night, in the dark club, out they crept, to drink and dance in their brightly coloured tennis shoes and white smiles.

Stevie turned to Henning. ‘He could be holding the girl in his flat.’

‘Do you really think so?’

She shrugged. ‘It could be that simple. Often it is.’

‘What do we do, follow them?’ But Henning’s voice was full of doubt.

Stevie nodded slowly, feeling unsure herself. It wasn’t going to be easy to follow them without being noticed. There was no guarantee, apart from a hunch, that Anya was at the flat, and the worst thing for Anya would be if the kidnappers discovered someone was sniffing around.

Stevie tapped her nail rapidly on the bar. ‘I’m worried that no one has made contact yet, apart from the necklace. I don’t understand. The people who took Anya must want something. But this Maraschenko doesn’t look like the sort of criminal who would be laundering large amounts of money through the banks, not if he’s drinking here. So pressuring Kozkov won’t be his motive for the kidnapping. He’s either working for someone, or he’s done it for money—’

‘Or some other nefarious motive . . .’ Henning’s voice was barely audible.

Stevie quickly shook her head. ‘You don’t take a girl like Anya for that. The risk is too expensive. You take someone no one will miss—that girl, for example.’ She indicated the canary girl with her head. They both watched her a moment in silence.

‘Can we really do no more than wait?’ Stevie said it more to herself, hoping the answer was no.

The little group was noisily getting ready to leave. Suddenly she came to a decision.

‘Henning, listen, I think we have to try. We’ll follow from a distance, be very careful. They’re all sailing a few sheets to the wind, I doubt they’ll notice even if we breathe down their necks.’

Henning’s face said it all.
‘And we’ll need a ride, fast.’

Scared, but knowing she must, Stevie shrugged on her coat, slid off the stool and hurried to follow Maraschenko.

Henning laid a hand on her shoulder. ‘Wait.’ He grabbed his overcoat and walked out, his hand hanging on to her, stumbling slightly.

They walked past Maraschenko and his group waiting for their coats, and stepped into the frosty night. Henning’s phone rang. He listened to the voice on the other end, his face serious.

‘Harashe. We’re outside The Boar.’ He hung up and Stevie turned to him expectantly.

‘That was Maxim,’ he said, pocketing the phone. ‘The arms dealer from the club.’

‘I remember him.’

‘There’s not much he doesn’t get to hear about in Moscow. It always surprises me, but it shouldn’t.’ Henning put both hands on Stevie’s shoulders. ‘He knows who you are, Stevie, and why you are in Moscow. He says Kozkov’s business is none of his business, but that, as you and I are obviously . . .’ Henning cleared his throat awkwardly. ‘As you and I are obviously friends, he wanted to do me a small favour. He has some information for you.’

‘Nothing more?’ Stevie’s mouth was dry, her words whispers.

‘No.’ Henning shook his head. ‘He’s nervous about telephones as it is. He’s sending a car.’ He squeezed her shoulders, concerned. ‘Are you afraid?’ he asked. ‘I’m sorry I got you mixed up with him. But he won’t hurt you.’

Stevie shook her head. ‘I’m not afraid,’ she said firmly, ignoring the butterflies exploding in her stomach. ‘So, Maxim’s helping me because you two are friends? I don’t really believe that.’

Henning pulled Stevie’s fur hat closer around her face, covering her flaming cheeks. It was desperately cold in the street. ‘I did him a good deed a few months ago—saved his favourite dog from drowning in a frozen lake outside Vladivostok. Maxim was very grateful, but he is a man who hates to be in debt of any kind. This is his way of paying off the debt he feels he owes me.’

‘That makes more sense,’ Stevie sighed, a little relieved. ‘I always look for the self-interest—from experience rather than cynicism. I’ve trusted and been burned, fool that I am—how does the saying go? “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” ’ She stopped for a minute, looking towards the entrance of the bar. ‘Are you coming with me? What about our mark?’

‘I’m better off flagging a lift if I’m going to follow Maraschenko,’ said Henning quietly. ‘Less conspicuous.’

Maraschenko and his friends left the bar and headed in their direction. Henning put his arm around Stevie and pulled her close. Stevie held her breath, almost faint with tension, but the group pushed past them without a glance and continued unsteadily along the street.

Then a black Mercedes pulled up in front of The Boar. The driver got out and opened the door. Stevie slipped quickly into the warm leather interior. Henning bent down to speak through the window. ‘I can’t imagine you could have anything to be ashamed about, Stevie.’ His voice was low, soft.

She said nothing but stared down at the snow-encrusted gutter.

I am ashamed at the relief I felt just now when I realised I wouldn’t have to follow Gregori Maraschenko myself. And that’s just for starters.

‘Henning,’ she looked up anxiously. ‘Be careful.’

Henning gave her a wink. ‘I’d say the same to you, only I’m not worried about you. You’ll probably be safer with Maxim than anywhere else in Moscow.’
The Mercedes drove Stevie through the night snow, the lonely stop lights, the dead boulevards. There was a motorcycle a few cars behind them. It seemed to stick close and yet never gained on them. Were they being followed? But when she leaned forward to mention it to the driver, the motorcycle was gone.

Stevie was hoping Maxim would have something to say about Anya, or Maraschenko—anything. Shady people most often knew more about the goings on in Shadowland than those who lived in the white light of day. They could rarely be relied upon unless their own interests were at stake, but in those circumstances, Stevie had found the corrupt to be no less reliable than the sound. She prayed Henning would be alright.

The car was pulling into a driveway flanked by a huge wrought-iron gate. Overhead, a huge sign read: CAH C—Sun City—and a painted Aztec warrior glared down at them.

Sun City, it turned out, was a solarium, a brand new facility, with twelve state-of-the-art machines, open twenty-four hours a day. The receptionist was a bubbly blonde in a tight white T-shirt. She looked more like an Ibizan club promoter than a Muscovite, but that was probably the idea.

It did feel slightly odd with the vibrant green astroturf, the giant plastic palms under the warm yellow lights, the upbeat house music, especially when outside it was midnight in Moscow, dark, dangerous and at least 40 degrees below zero. Stevie could see the appeal of Sun City.

‘Vi Stevie?’ The Ibizan clubber asked brightly. Stevie nodded.

‘Maxim wants to see you in the solarium.’

The blonde led her to the cubicles. Each housed a sun bed, the end one, two beds. The girl handed Stevie a pair of dark purple goggles.

‘You will be in this one.’ She indicated the sun bed closest to the door.

‘But I don’t really tan,’ Stevie began in protest. ‘You see how pale I am? I burn. Like toast.’

‘Everyone can tan,’ the girl beamed. ‘It’s all in the mind.’

‘Do you at least have some sunscreen?’

The girl looked at Stevie as if she were deranged but did pull out a bottle of SPF 10. Better than nothing.

‘Please,’ she handed Stevie the bottle, ‘no mobile phones.’

Stevie had pulled hers out and held up a finger. ‘Adna minuta, pozhaluista,’ she said.

There was a text message waiting on it from Josie. The girl was a workaholic. She opened it:

Stevie: terrible photo. It took a miracle: Gregori Petrovitch Maraschenko—on Interpol watch list. Known thug, several criminal convictions, mainly assault and robbery. Suspected low-level links to international crime figures.

International crime figures—that didn’t really narrow things down, especially not in Russia, but it did make it seem unlikely that Maraschenko was seeking influence over Kozkov’s banking reforms. So the question remained: what did he want with Anya?

Stevie erased the message and stepped into her cubicle. Hopefully Maxim would have something to tell her.

The things we do, thought Stevie as she stripped off, smeared on a thick layer of sun cream and climbed into the white plastic coffin. That’s what it felt like, a coffin.

‘Where’s Mr Krutchik?’ she asked, hoping she sounded casual.

‘He’ll be here in a minute.’ The girl set the timer and the dials on the machine and slowly lowered the lid. There was a loud clicking and strips of light came on above and below Stevie. A whirring started and warm air began to circulate through the machine. Stevie thought she had never before felt more like a chicken, roasting in a fan-forced oven.

I hope Maxim doesn’t take too long . . .

At first Stevie didn’t dare to open her eyes. Even with the thick purple goggles she was afraid they would burn. It was getting hot, a strange, electronic heat that had little to do with days lounging on the granite boulders of the Costa Smeralda, nor with the feel of the fine white sand of Australia’s southeastern beaches, nor even with the bright white sunshine that hit the striped deck chairs overlooking the lake of Zurich at the Eden Roc. She realised she longed for summer with every cell in her roasting body.

Over the noise of the machine, Stevie heard the door open, then close and lock. She prised an eyelid open but
could see only bright light in various shades of purple.

‘Slushaiyte.’ The man’s voice was quiet, but audible over the humming machines. ‘Listen. I am the friend of Henning who wishes to do him a favour. My name is Maxim.’

Stevie, naked under the lights, her eyes sealed by goggles, could only ignore how surreal the whole thing was and respond in kind.

‘I remember you, Maxim. I am Stevie.’

‘I know.’

There was a long silence. Stevie imagined Maxim was undressing, getting ready to tan. Sure enough, the lid to his electronic coffin soon creaked, and the motor started whirring.

‘There are two bodyguards outside the door,’ Maxim’s voice came slightly muffled now. ‘So you can tan in peace with no concern about interruptions. I like to talk here, Stevie, because I like to tan, and because the noise of these machines is at a particular frequency that makes it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop electronically. Convenient, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Oh very, Maxim. Ingenious.’

‘I like to come here and pretend I am in St Tropez or Ibiza. Just for an hour. It is important to be tanned. It makes a man look vital, young and fertile. I can’t afford to have my enemies ever think I am weak or they strike. But mostly it is my vanity. I like to look good. Pale colours and gold jewellery always look better on tanned skin.’

Stevie suddenly felt like she might be at the beautician’s, having a pedicure and overhearing the conversation of the other women. She had to remind herself that Maxim—oh yes, she had done a little research on him the night after they had met—was certainly in a group that included the top twenty most wanted men in the world. Arms trafficking was his big deviance, but he sold anything to anyone regardless of politics, intent, allegiances or any other considerations. As a total privateer, he was free from any of the constraints of foreign policy or pretence of morality and he could do business with whomever could pay.

Possibly there were some members of democratic governments around the world who secretly envied Maxim this freedom, but this only made them want to catch him even more. And they had tried, many times. But each time they grounded a plane in Afghanistan, or the Congo, or any other godforsaken place rent by catastrophe, they had found nothing—a cargo of frozen chickens, an empty plane, ‘humanitarian relief’ supplies . . . Maxim was too clever. He dealt in anything, legal and legitimate as well as illegal and immoral. It didn’t matter. Maxim did not pretend to try to distinguish between good and evil, and right and wrong. He stuck to what he knew—buying and selling, the demands of the market.

He was in his early forties and a billionaire a few times over. This empire had all been built since the fall of the USSR. Maxim was an extraordinary example of a global entrepreneur, if you admired him; a merchant of death, if you did not.

‘These machines are designed to give a perfect Mediterranean tan,’ Maxim was still on the subject.

Stevie didn’t quite know what to say. She was caught in a Moscow solarium at two o’clock in the morning with an international über-criminal and he wanted to discuss the quality of his tan.

‘How lovely,’ seemed appropriate.

Maxim switched to business with no warning. ‘I know who you work for, Stevie Duveen, I know what you do for Hazard Limited, and I know why you are in Moscow. None of this is of any concern to me. But it is relevant in the service I wish to do you—or rather, my friend Henning.’

‘In that case, I will be equally frank.’ Stevie lay very still and kept her voice flat. ‘Do you know anything that can help me find Anya Kozkov?’

‘No. And I don’t wish to be involved in that matter.’

Stevie could hardly hide her frustration. ‘Then you can be of no help to me.’

The whirring on Stevie’s machine clicked to a halt. The lights in her sarcophagus went out. The perspiration covering her body chilled her.

Maxim continued unperturbed. ‘I believe your company has a certain interest in a pair of American actors: Douglas Hammer and Sandy Belle, and their son, Clinton-Bill.’ Why, thought Stevie, did she suddenly feel as if she were being haunted by the Hammer-Belles?

‘Kennedy-Jack,’ she corrected cautiously. ‘Yes, go on please, Maxim.’
‘A Romanian kidnap gang may be planning to snatch them.’ His voice was matter-of-fact, as if he came across this sort of information every day, which he probably did in his world. ‘The Romanians are getting a little bit more organised, a little bit more ambitious, spreading their wings, shall we say, into Western Europe. A few token security bears are no longer enough to put them off.’

‘This is useful information, Maxim. Can you tell me anything else?’

‘They want a target that will get a lot of publicity because they want to make a name for themselves.’ There was a note of scorn in Maxim’s voice. He obviously did not think much of Romanian kidnap gangs.

‘So this is a PR stunt for the Romanians?’

‘More or less. They will, of course, demand a lot of money but they may panic, especially when the CIA go after them. I fear things wouldn’t end well for your Americans.’

‘I’ve come up against them before,’ Stevie said slowly.

‘The Swarovskis. Yes, I read.’

She trod carefully. ‘Any ideas on how they might do it?’

‘I would be surprised if they planned anything very imaginative. A nice road block, masked men with semi-automatics; that sort of thing brings them enjoyment.’ Maxim made it sound like the gang was planning a picnic by the river.

Stevie made a mental note: highly visible protection measures and heavy arms might be the thing.

‘Really, though,’ Maxim continued, ‘you should advise your clients to keep a low profile. The whole of Moscow knows, for example, that Miss Belle’s Hermes bag alone is worth over $65,000—my girlfriend reminds me often enough. Discretion is the best defence against kidnappers, a tactic I myself have adopted with vigour.’

‘Trust me, Maxim, I have tried. They’re not the type to do much quietly.’

‘Then I suppose they have to accept the consequences of the attention they seek.’

Neither spoke for some time, the dull whirring of Maxim’s sunbed filling the silence. Stevie was feeling very sleepy in hers, the ice outside all but forgotten. She gathered her courage before it too left her.

‘Maxim, are you sure you can tell me nothing about Anya Kozkov?’

There was an even longer silence.

Stevie took a deep breath. ‘Gregori Petrovitch Maraschenko. Do you know him?’

She heard Maxim’s sunbed stop, the man climb out. The lid on her bed was flung open.

Through her purple goggles she saw the giant bald mastermind, dressed only in a paper g-string. It would have been comical if the man hadn’t been so dangerous, and if the expression on his face hadn’t been so frightening.

Stevie forgot she was naked as he bent down and spoke in a low voice. ‘Why are you asking about him?’

Stevie wondered if she was about to say too much, but there were so few leads . . . ‘You know him. Please help me. I think he may be connected to Anya’s disappearance.’

Maxim opened a cupboard and pulled out a machine gun made of glass. He unscrewed the tip of the gun barrel and poured vodka into two glasses.

‘It’s a new vodka—called Kalashnikov. It’s very good.’ He handed Stevie a glass.

‘Nazdarovye’.

They drank.

‘He has a tattoo of a smiling cat,’ Stevie persisted.

Maxim closed the lid of his sunbed and restarted the whirring motor. ‘I know Maraschenko.’ He refilled the glasses. ‘He came to see me a few months ago. He said to me, “Maxim, I want to go into business for myself. I’m tired of doing dirty, two-bit jobs that lack any elegance. Half the time I just feel like a trained attack dog.” He said he knew he was better than that. I advised him he wouldn’t make serious money until he started to work for himself. But I warned him that there are responsibilities too, the vagaries of the market. These can be stressful.’

‘He wanted career advice from you?’ Stevie, perched on the edge of her sunbed, a slim pink arm slung across her chest, was attempting to hide both her breasts and her surprise.

Maxim flashed his teeth. ‘Why not? He felt his career prospects were at a dead end. He had been doing the same old stuff for years with no hope of promotion. He said it was depressing him, that he was an ambitious man, willing to work hard.’
‘Did he want you to hire him?’
Maxim shrugged. ‘I think he might have. He told me he saw how I had positioned myself at the sophisticated end of the market and he respected that. But I don’t need a new man.’
Maxim downed his vodka and reached for Stevie’s glass, refilling both again. ‘I felt a bit sad for him. Life is never easy for ageing thugs. I told him he needed to find a niche in the market. There are so many hit men today, two-rouble hoods with a gun selling themselves as professionals. Really, there should be some sort of accreditation to distinguish professionals from amateurs. It would certainly help employers.’
He sat back down. Stevie wished Maxim would lift his goggles and put a towel on. It would give her a chance to reach for a towel. She was beginning to feel acutely naked. But he didn’t move, and so neither did she.
‘I built my own reputation slowly and carefully as someone who can always be trusted and who can always get the job done, whatever it is. I’m sure it is the same in your work, Stevie, you will understand this. I’m not saying of course that competition is a bad thing. Competition is a good thing—it creates a real state of play. If you protect the industry, you get people who are no good at their jobs, or who are lazy, being given the same pay and opportunity as those who are very skilled and prepared to work hard. Everything goes downhill. If you are good, and you can provide what the market wants, word spreads. People will pay for a job well done. I told him, don’t fear competition.’
There was a long pause. Maxim drained his glass and turned his goggle-gaze to Stevie.
‘Maraschenko contacted me again a few days ago. He told me that he had taken my advice and that he had something to sell me, something very special—a young girl with a very important daddy. I didn’t want to know any more and I told him that. I don’t deal in people. It’s too messy.’
Stevie began to shiver with cold despite the tanning heat. It was an auction: Maraschenko was planning to sell Anya to the highest bidder. That was why he was waiting.
‘So,’ she swallowed, trying to keep her voice from cracking. ‘Who would Anya be most valuable to?’
‘Everyone wants to get Kozkov—except me!’ Maxim laughed.
‘The list is long.’
Stevie leaned forward, her voice smooth and persuasive. ‘Surely there is someone at the top of that list, someone who wouldn’t hesitate to take up an offer like Maraschenko’s.’
Maxim looked at Stevie, who hadn’t taken her goggles off either.
‘If I were you, Stevie Duveen, I would leave this alone. You don’t know what you are getting yourself into.’
‘Please, Maxim,’ Stevie took off her goggles and opened her big green eyes wide. ‘What am I getting myself into?’
Maxim poured another vodka from the glass gun—would the man ever stop? He hunted around and found a cigarette, taking his time to light it.
He exhaled the smoke from his lungs, his eyes now on the ceiling.
‘The man who would take most perverse pleasure in a stunt like this? My dollars would be on “The Man from Chernobyl”.’
‘A Ukrainian? What’s his real name?’
Maxim shook his head and drew heavily on his cigarette. ‘His name is Felix Dragoman.’
‘Thank you, Maxim,’ Stevie whispered, and began to reach for a towel. But Maxim didn’t move.
‘Because the dog Henning saved was my favourite—had it been any of my other dogs . . . I will give you some advice from the heart, Stevie Duveen. Stay away from this. Dragoman has very close ties to the siloviki.’
Stevie’s reaching hand froze in mid-air; she drew it cautiously back in. ‘I thought they were a myth, a conspiracy theory touted by fugitive oligarchs in London.’
‘Ha! So you have heard of the siloviki.’
Stevie paused; this was a dangerous subject. ‘The story I know is of a secret power circle within the Kremlin dedicated to keeping the president and his men in power. As I understand it, the siloviki are basically waging a black-ops war against all dissent and opposition. Some of the members are ex-KGB and they’re rumoured to have been behind some of the wilder poisoning and assassination cases abroad, as well as numerous deaths and disappearances back home.’
‘Have you noticed the shift, Stevie Duveen?’ Maxim lifted his goggles and stared right at her. ‘There have always
been too many homicides in the new Russia, only today, the guns are being pointed more and more at high-profile journalists, politicians and bankers—people of strategic importance.’

‘You think the siloviki are behind the new wave of violence?’

Maxim shrugged. ‘I can only tell you it is not the mafiya making the orders. The government has re-empowered the security service to get the gangs under control. The Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti—FSB—has been flooded with cash; senior members of the intelligence community have been placed in positions of great power, in business, the Duma, other political posts. The president knows he can count on their loyalty, and they will support his use of strength—what is the West calling it now? Democratic fascism?—to pull our country together.’

Stevie had seen the homicide figures and Maxim’s theory would explain the shift in targets. While organised crime gangs killed to protect their turf, advance their business, or for revenge, the FSB were motivated by ideology. They had the interest of the Russian state, and the politicians they served, firmly at the forefront of their minds.

Maxim stubbed out his cigarette and reached for the Kalashnikov. ‘The murders are political.’

Stevie’s eyes blazed now, as she put the pieces together in her mind. ‘And the siloviki fund their operations by joint ventures with organised crime—meaning the funds to wage their secret war are completely invisible and deniable. Is this how Felix Dragoman is involved?’

Maxim downed his glass and nodded. ‘Dragoman makes “gifts” in return for political favours—blocking particular government legislation, pushing arms contracts his way, turning a blind eye to triple billing on these contracts. He in turn makes the siloviki directors of his companies, or consultants, and pays them exorbitantly. The right hand washes the left and everyone is clean.’

‘And you say this circle of siloviki really exists?’ Stevie’s green eyes were wide. ‘It’s always fervently denied whenever anyone dares to bring it up.’

‘Denied probably by the very people who belong to it. It exists—I know—and it is very powerful. The siloviki are dangerous.’

Stevie sat back. ‘Coming from you, that’s . . .’

‘Stevie Duveen, I have nothing on their ruthlessness and power.’

Stevie chanced a hand on Maxim’s arm. ‘Please, Maxim, where can I find Felix Dragoman?’

But Maxim shook his head and held up his hand. The conversation was over, the debt to Henning had been repaid.

Safely back in her hotel, Stevie sent a message to Josie at Hazard: Who is Felix Dragoman, The Man from Chernobyl? Then sat in the lobby and waited anxiously for Henning. When he finally appeared, Stevie’s stomach turned over: a huge red-and-purple welt throbbed on the side of his face, disfiguring his right eye. It was caked with dried blood.

She jumped to her feet. ‘My God, what happened? Are you alright?’

‘Does it look that bad? It’s only a graze.’

‘Did they—’ Henning shook his head gingerly. ‘It wasn’t Maraschenko—they didn’t spot me. Let’s sit and I’ll tell you everything—or rather, nothing.’

Stevie’s spirits fell. She realised all this time she had been hoping for a miracle.

‘Let’s go up to my room. It’s more private,’ her attention still on his face. ‘Do we need to get you to a doctor?’

‘I’m absolutely fine.’

Stevie didn’t think he looked at all fine. She was surprised at how much the sight of his battered face affected her. She was not generally over-sensitive to blood and bumps.

As she closed the hotel room door behind them, Henning groaned and Stevie instinctively shot a hand out to take his. She was rewarded with a big smile and felt suddenly self-conscious. She retracted her hand.

‘I think we need food. And some ice.’ She ordered blinis and a small bottle of vodka on ice, then looked expectantly at Henning.

‘It all began well. I flagged down a car outside The Boar and paid the driver an obscene amount to follow Maraschenko’s car. We could stay quite close behind him in the city, but the minute we got to the suburbs, the traffic thinned down to almost nothing and we had to keep our distance. We followed the car to a massive housing estate in the northwest of the city.’ Henning broke off. ‘Would you light me a cigarette, darling Stevie?’ She did as he asked, placing it gingerly between his lips. ‘It’s a monstrous place,’ he continued, ‘all concrete and dereliction of the most unexciting kind. There are five towers of apartment buildings—Soviet-bloc style—each would hold three
or four hundred apartments. I was nervous about going in too close so we parked a little way off.’

The waiter arrived at the door with the blinis, and the vodka in a silver bucket of ice. He seemed inclined to linger in the room, his eyes on Henning’s face. Stevie sent him on his way with some roubles and a rather fierce glare. She quickly folded a handful of ice into the linen napkin and handed it to Henning.

‘Thank you.’ He held the ice gratefully to his face. Stevie noticed the knuckles on both hands were swollen, some bleeding. She felt a lump grow in her throat.

‘Maraschenko and his mob went into the second tower block. I paid the driver another small fortune to wait for me and I followed as soon as I thought it was safe. But there’s got to be around twelve, fifteen hundred people in there, and it’s not the sort of place where people put their name on their letterbox: graffiti, clumps of wolfish teens, the smell of piss. I didn’t think knocking on doors would be such a good idea, just in case the word got back to Maraschenko that someone was looking for him.’

Stevie considered a moment. ‘It sounds like the ideal place to hide a young girl. There’s no way she can climb out of a window or yell for help, for starters. If the place is teeming with people, one more or less is not going to be noticed.’ She poured out two small glasses of vodka. ‘What happened to your head, then?’

‘My ride, of course, had vanished by the time I got out. I was stranded, so I started walking towards the highway. I had to walk through an underpass and I was jumped by three guys—one hit me from behind with a bottle. That’s the face. Luckily I didn’t lose consciousness and I managed to get rid of them.’ Both of his eyes were now bloodshot.

‘You got rid of them, just like that?’ Stevie raised a neat eyebrow.

‘Well, it took a little rough stuff.’ Henning flexed his strong, damaged hands painfully.

‘You took on three guys armed with bottles with your bare hands?’

Stevie’s horrified look seemed to have the opposite effect on Henning.

He began to laugh. ‘Just because I try to dress well doesn’t mean I’m going to lie down and cry if three kids want to cause a bit of trouble.’

Stevie didn’t share his merriment and Henning grew serious again.

‘What did Maxim have to say?’

Stevie told all, keeping a very close eye on Henning. He looked awful. The welt was worse and dark circles had pooled under his eyes.

‘I still think a doctor might be a good idea, Henning, indestructible dandy or not,’ she told him when she’d finished telling her story.

‘Stevie, I assure you—’ As he stood to emphasise his point, his leg gave way and he clutch the table.

Stevie leapt to her feet and grabbed Henning tightly round the waist, supporting him. ‘You’re swooning like a maiden. I’m calling one.

You don’t want to die of a brain haemorrhage before we find Anya.’

‘Well, I’m not going to hospital.’ Henning scowled. ‘I’d be better off rolling around in rusty barbed wire.’

‘Come on.’ Stevie pulled on his arm. ‘We’ll call Kozkov on the way.’

In less than an hour, Henning was lying in a bed in a private clinic under close observation. The doctors feared swelling of the brain. Henning feared the doctors. He looked over at Stevie, with her pale worried face by his bed.

‘I’m fine,’ he tried to reassure her. ‘It’s you I’m worried about.

Have you looked in the mirror?’

Stevie got up and stared in the glass. Her cheeks were hot pink and, above them, her eyes were rimmed with white from where the goggles had protected her skin from the intense UV exposure. Even the parting in her hair had scorched.

Laughter came from the bed. ‘You look like an angry raccoon.’

_Stevie had not slept after_ returning from the hospital, but she felt surprisingly alert. There was too much to do for sleep. In her room, she did some strength exercises—she called them her callisthenics—lunging until her legs shook, pulling herself up on the edge of the door frame, and stretching her whole body. Then she showered (only when pressed for time would she eschew the glories of the bath) and dressed quickly in a navy knee-length skirt made of heavy, swinging wool, a wide crocodile belt, pulled tight, and a crisp white shirt.

Today was a day for pearl earrings, she felt, and put on her biggest single pearls, a gift from some Japanese clients
with headquarters in Kawasaki. The rings around her eyes she could do nothing about. She looked like she had just spent a week dog-sledding across Alaska.

Stevie cinched her belt a little tighter and, feeling sufficiently pulled together, called for a double breakfast of eggs and caviar and toast, and a large pot of coffee.

She pulled out her tiny telephone and dialled David Rice in London. She hated the thing and had chosen the smallest model possible, hoping somehow to reduce its annoyance. It was the size of a matchbox and consequently often impossible to find in her handbag.

‘I hope you’re calling me with your flight details home.’ His voice was jovial—for Rice—and although London was three hours behind Moscow, Stevie knew she had been lucky enough to catch him during, rather than before, his early breakfast. ‘The Hammer-Belles are very pleased you’re joining them in Switzerland,’ he added.

He would be sitting by the window in his robe, the Times folded into a neat oblong, a perfectly boiled egg waiting in its cup and a pot of hot coffee ready. In every way, his life was solid and elegant.

Stevie sometimes wished she could belong in it, that she could get further than the polished hall of the lovely Chelsea flat. She also knew she never would.

‘I am ringing about the Hammer-Belles, actually.’ Then she told Rice about the Romanians and the possible kidnap plot. ‘This is just a rumour, but then, rumours in the underworld—’ ‘Are like rumours in the other,’ Rice finished abruptly. ‘But possibly worth paying attention to. Who gave you this information, Stevie?’

‘Maxim Krutchik.’

There was a pause on the line.

‘Stevie, why do you know Maxim Krutchik?’

‘He’s a friend of Henning’s.’

There was a longer silence.

‘I’m not sure I like this Henning chap.’ Rice’s voice had sharpened.

‘He seems determined to drag you into all sorts of trouble. Is he there with you now?’

At half past eight in the morning? Stevie knew what Rice must be thinking and rushed to set him straight.

‘It’s not like that. No. He’s just a friend. He is in hospital actually.

He was attacked.’

Rice exploded. ‘For God’s sake, Stevie! What are you doing? Get out of Moscow at once! Don’t be a damn fool, girl. This is the last straw.’

‘David, I’m not in any danger. I’m not doing anything unconsidered. A fifteen-year-old girl has been kidnapped and no one is doing anything about it. How can I leave it alone?’

‘Just do,’ her boss bellowed down the line.

Stevie kept her voice calm. ‘I’m only finding out as much as possible so I can give Constantine the best picture of the situation, when he gets here.’

Silence on the line. When Rice spoke again, his voice had softened. ‘Constantine is already in Moscow. I sent him out with a team when I heard you had him on stand-by. I know exactly what you’ve been doing, Stevie. That’s why I’m so worried. We just couldn’t find out who you went to meet in that solarium.’

‘You’ve had me followed?’ Her voice cracked.

‘We almost pulled you out when the shooters hit those men in front of you. We thought they were after you.’

Stevie remembered the babushka who had knocked her flat. Her throat went dry. ‘I thought they were after me too . . . I can’t believe you had me followed. I don’t need nannies.’

‘You bloody well do, Stevie.’

Stevie flushed with anger. Rice didn’t believe she could handle it. While a small part of her was touched that he cared enough, most of her was furious that he doubted her judgement. What she wanted to do was shout ‘Call off your dogs!’ Instead she said quietly, ‘I think I know who’s got her.’

She had Rice’s attention.

‘Have you heard of Felix Dragoman, or the siloviki?’

‘Stevie, this is getting worse and worse.’

‘Maxim says the siloviki exist, and that Dragoman has ties to them. I think Anya will be used to pressure Kozkov
in some way over the banking reforms. Maxim implied the *siloviki* could benefit from this, too. I need to know more about them, and Dragoman.’

‘I’m surprised they bothered with something so subtle. Usually it’s a bullet to the head.’

Stevie continued quickly. ‘Maxim was suggesting that Anya had been snatched by a thug who saw an opportunity. He’s holding an auction of sorts, selling his catch off to the person who wants her most.

Anyway, it wouldn’t be easy to replace Kozkov—and an assassination would look pretty bad to the rest of the world.’

‘Never stopped anyone before.’ Rice cleared his throat, reluctant. ‘I’ll see what I can find out. But you, in turn, have to extricate yourself from this mess. Take on the Hammer-Belle job. I’ll send Kozkov some more men if he wants them, but I want you out.’

Rice rang off without waiting for a reply.

Stevie put her phone down on the table and sat back. She was angry that Rice treated her like a child, ordering her around like that. But she had to admit, she was also grateful she had him as an ally. She would think about the Hammer-Belles and David’s orders later. Right now, she had Maraschenko to deal with: did he still have Anya, or had he sold her on already? Stevie was tempted to order a private assault team. If Anya was passed on, it could be a lot more difficult to get her back.

Her phone rang, making her jump slightly.

It was Valery Kozkov. The kidnappers had made contact.
The black Mercedes crawled through the city, hunting for a way out.

Irina had found a hand-delivered package in their mailbox that morning. She had known at once.

Inside the package was a satellite phone and a polaroid of Anya.

In it, Irina’s daughter was holding up the front page of the day’s newspaper—disputes over oil exploration rights in the Caspian—Irina had skimmed it only minutes before as she drank her early morning tea. Her legs had given way.

Valery Kozkov had called Stevie moments later and she’d rushed over.

The polaroid was intended as proof, Stevie had told the family, that Anya was alive and well and that whoever was holding her was willing to begin negotiations. It was, Stevie had stressed several times, a good sign.

‘And the newspaper tells us she’s most likely still in the country,’ she added, trying to offer comfort where there was very little.

In the photo, Anya had her eyes half closed. She was wearing a gold bomber jacket.

‘It’s not hers,’ Irina had pointed to the jacket. ‘Anya doesn’t own a jacket like that!’ She repeated it several times, as if somehow the strange jacket negated everything.

There was also a typed note inside. It ordered the family to their dacha—their summer house—and to wait for the satellite phone to ring.

Constantine Dinov had arrived at their Moscow home ten minutes after Stevie’s call. The Kozkovs were driving through the outskirts of Moscow now. Constellations of massive tower blocks loomed on either side of the road, overlooking a frozen river.

Valery sat in the front passenger seat; Constantine drove, wearing a chauffeur’s hat to avoid suspicion. Stevie had filled Constantine in on as much as there had been time for. Irina and Vadim sat in the back with her, Saskia the Borshoi at their feet, but they were silent. She was grateful for the chance to sit still and think. The action would come later.

Once out of Moscow, they sped through a white landscape, mostly flat, interfered with here and there by a dilapidated fence, a concrete farmhouse, a smoking factory, a black copse of pines.

They drove for hours until they were in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing but shades of white and grey taking on different shapes outside the tinted windows. Once they came across a huge red tractor trundling on the road, its vivid colour almost obscene in the absence of all others. It could have been the end of the world.

Their destination looked like a large snowdrift surrounded by the silvery stalks of Russian birches, tall and naked and as fine as legs. Stevie shivered at the thought of having to get out of the car, into—was Kozkov sure there was a dacha under there? But there was indeed a wooden house, a cupola on the roof, buried under all that white.

Stevie stepped out into the pale blue light of the early afternoon. The scent of birch and brittle ice was crisp and unfamiliar, not the pine-scented air she knew from the alps. It was more than silent. It was stillness distilled: the heavy snow, the viscous rays of dying daylight, no birds or bells or distant engines.

Then Saskia bounded out of the back seat, warm and full of life, brushing past Stevie, out to sniff the snow. She ran about, her long fur standing and thickening in the cold. This winter world was the one she had been created for and she was a happy dog.

Along the front of the dacha ran a wooden verandah overhung with snow; three steps up, there was a heavy door. The generator was out of oil and Vadim was sent to investigate; there were only candles but many of them, on every sill and table and even the floor. Irina floated around the house in the semi-darkness lighting them. The place smelt of pale wood and tea leaves.

Stevie was shown to a small room—the smaller rooms, Irina explained, would be warmer—with wooden floors, walls and ceiling; a wrought-iron bed in one corner, a chest of drawers against the far wall. It was a room that had been furnished for the summer months.

Stevie threw down her crocodile bag and peered out from the small window. It was black outside; darkness had fallen quickly. Checking her phone, she saw there was no reception. The house had no landline.

She went in search of Constantine. The Greek was in his room, staring out at the white fields. He was a lean man with longish curling hair and a sharp nose. He came from a family of traders in the Balkans and spoke just about...
every language under the sun. Stevie had often wanted to ask how he had come into this line of work, but Constantine was not a man of superfluous words, if he spoke at all. The words he did use, he made count. He was, like David Rice, a man you wanted on your side in battle.

‘Does your mobile have reception, Constantine?’

He shook his head.

‘Hence the satellite phone . . . ’ Stevie added.

Constantine nodded. ‘They have isolated us very nicely. Anyone coming or going will be easily noticed by surveillance. There is no way to communicate with the outside world. The satellite phone has no doubt been programmed to receive calls only.’

Stevie took one of Constantine’s offered cigarettes even though they were much too strong for her.

‘The family?’ he asked.

Stevie told him what she knew about the Kozkovs, about Anya, about what had happened to her and why, and who they suspected was responsible.

Constantine did not interrupt, just nodded from time to time.

When she had finished he said simply, ‘Best we stay close to them.’

In the sitting room, a huge fire was spreading heat through the chilly air. Irina had laid a white cloth on the table and placed several bottles, clean glasses and an unopened tin of olives. Silently she poured five glasses of vodka, her face paler than ever, her mouth drawn tight. The tin of olives was covered in dust and no one had thought to bring a tin opener.

‘This is usually such a happy place.’ Kozkov was staring into the fire. ‘We’ve had so many wonderful summers together. The place is quite different then, full of sunlight and laughter and wild flowers.’

He addressed Stevie. ‘You must come again in the summer, when all this . . . ’ He waved his hand, lost for the right words to describe what was happening.

‘There is a lake not far from the house—you can see it from here when it’s not all covered in snow,’ Irina said, her face suddenly animated. ‘Anya and Vadim used to float about in a little dinghy. It only had one oar and they used to just go in circles.’ To Stevie’s surprise, she laughed. ‘It was magical.’

Irina handed round the rather large glasses of vodka and sat down. ‘I feel we should have more hope than this,’ she said quietly, her face losing its flash of joy. ‘We are all sitting here wondering if we will ever have another summer like those past, with everyone together. We are admitting a defeat before we have even begun. I believe we will get Anya back and everything will be alright.’ Her eyes sought Kozkov. ‘I need to believe that.’

‘Irina, there is every reason to hope.’ Stevie moved to stand beside her. ‘The kidnappers have made contact and will contact us again tomorrow. They will make their demands and from then, it becomes a matter of negotiation.’ Stevie looked to Constantine for support.

‘There exists, somewhere between you and them, a point where you are able to meet the demands, and at which the kidnappers will be satisfied.’ Constantine’s voice was steady and calm. It could make anyone trust him. ‘We simply find that point.’

‘And then they will return her?’ Vadim was staring straight at Constantine. The Greek said nothing; Stevie jumped in. ‘Yes, then they will return her.’ And she believed it. There was no reason, at that point, not to.

They tried to talk about other things but there was mostly silence. The vodka and the fire had driven out the cold but they hadn’t brought any food. Stevie went through the kitchen cupboards, disturbing a few dried spiders, noting the tin of Italian coffee with relief. She found a bag of white rice, and a tin of tuna, some capers and spices. With these she cobbled together a kedgeree of sorts.

Constantine and the family sat around the table. The kedgeree was unspectacular but it was filling and hot, and they would need the energy tomorrow. In any case, food and the table nourished more than stomachs in Stevie’s experience. Constantine ran through the battle plan.

Details were a good way to focus the tension.

‘Initially, we do exactly as they ask. We want to win their trust. When the phone rings, you, Valery, will answer. If they will not agree to speak to me, then you must speak. Try to write down words that will let me know what is going on. We need to know if this Maraschenko is still holding Anya, or if she has been moved. Anything you can learn through your ears can help.’ Valery nodded, his face drawn and tight.

Vadim stood and filled everyone’s glass with vodka. Kozkov downed his quickly. After a time, he began to speak,
leaning back in his chair, his voice low.

‘My banking reforms were supposed to make a real difference. I spent my first years in the job quietly pulling everything apart and putting it back together to find the rot. I decided not to make waves unless it was absolutely necessary. I am not,’ he shrugged with a wry smile, ‘suicidal. My intervention was going to be surgical. What I found was a banking legislation so full of loopholes that it was hard to believe it was not intentional. I decided not to make waves unless it was absolutely necessary. I began to believe that people in the treasury and legislators were operating together to draft deliberately flawed legislation. When I began to freeze bank assets, I began to get death threats. It was, of course, expected. Anya—that was not.’

No sane man would envy his job, thought Stevie. ‘Your reputation as an incorruptible figure may have worked against you, Valery. Money, political favours, a villa in St Tropez might have swayed many men in positions of power.’

Kozkov nodded. ‘It has made me many enemies.’

‘Surely it has made you friends, too,’ she asked.

‘Outside Russia . . . perhaps.’ He shrugged again. ‘But perhaps no one outside Russia cares what happens here.’

‘You still have nuclear weapons and energy,’ Stevie replied. ‘The world will always care.’

‘Not for the fate of the Russian people, only for the geo-political entity.’

Vadim pushed his plate away and lit a cigarette, glowering at his father. Kozkov appeared not to notice. He continued talking. ‘Not even the Russian people care about the fate of the Russian people.’

‘Surely that’s not true,’ Stevie began to protest, thinking of Galina, of Masha.

‘Let me give you an example of what I mean,’ Kozkov turned his tired eyes to her. ‘When Anya went missing, I kept up appearances. I kept going in to the office, every morning at eight, same clothes, same hat, everything. All my colleagues at the bank knew something was terribly wrong but no one said a word to me. This wasn’t for discretion, or fear of saying the wrong thing, like it might be in your country. The long reign of violence and fear in the old Russia, and now the corruption of the new, has so brutalised their sensibilities that not one dared to speak a compassionate word.’

Vadim pushed his chair away from the table and went to help his mother wash the few plates in the sink.

‘It is exactly this—this paralysing mistrust—that I am trying to crush. Trust is the foundation of a proper market economy. Anything else is a shambles.’

Kozkov’s eyes glinted, his cheeks grew a little redder. Here was a man passionate about changing the social fabric of his country. There was no doubt: head of the Russian Central Bank was not just a position for him, it was a vocation. He didn’t know whom he could turn to. The system itself was suspect—corrupt elements, the wheels of politics were all hidden behind the metal doors and tinted windows of life in the new Russia.

‘Valery, what do you know about the siloviki?’ Stevie said the name warily, as if to say it out loud would somehow evoke them. ‘Do they really exist?’

There was a pause as Valery leaned back in his chair and stared at Stevie. He reached for his packet of cigarettes and shook one loose, tapped it twice on the tabletop and put it in his mouth.

‘The siloviki,’ he said slowly. He looked around for a match. ‘They are the—how would you call them?—the bogeymen of the Kremlin.’ He struck the match and lit his cigarette. ‘Do they exist as an organised circle with members and specific goals? I don’t know. Are there men within the government who serve only their own interests, who are morally bankrupt, who have links to organised crime, and who are efficiently ruthless in the pursuit of what they want? Yes. Are there men who still believe in a system of government that relies on personal conceptions of power? Incredible as it may seem, yes.’ He exhaled a long column of smoke. ‘You can give these men a name—the siloviki—perhaps it makes them somehow more manageable. But I see them only as the locus of a cancerous corruption that has spread nationwide. As it was before, so it is now: no one can be trusted.’

Irina and Vadim left the room. They were probably not in the mood to hear about their country’s problems when they were being crushed under the weight of their own anguish.

Kozkov glanced at the doorway his wife had just walked through, then leaned forward on his elbows. ‘I’m being torn in two directions. On the one hand I have my integrity, my refusal to be pressured; then there is this most terrible strain . . . this horrible concern, and love I feel for my daughter.’

He reached for the vodka bottle then thought the better of it. ‘I can’t speak to Irina about this. I don’t think she would understand—or could bear to have the conversation.’

Stevie kept her voice low, not wanting to be overheard, but she had to ask. ‘What are you going to do, Valery, if
the kidnappers ask you to compromise your ideals?’

Anya’s father stubbed out his cigarette, screwing the butt viciously into the ashtray. ‘Everything I have fought for for Russia’s future—Russia’s future itself perhaps—is at stake. To give in is almost unthinkable.’ He gave a bitter smile. ‘The incorruptible Kozkov crumbling, yet another betrayal of Russia’s chances.’

He looked up at Stevie. The fire leaving his face abruptly. ‘And yet there is a little space, Stevie, between unthinkable and possible, and in that little space lies for me all the world.’ His voice was almost a whisper. ‘Does that answer your question?’

They joined the others by the fire in the next room. Stevie sat on the floor in front of it, warming her toes. Saskia lay at Irina’s feet, her own delicate paws stretched towards the flames.

‘Can I ask you,’ Stevie turned to Anya’s father, ‘does the name Felix Dragoman mean anything to you?’

Kozkov drew his eyebrows together. ‘The name is familiar . . .’

It was Vadim, flushed, who spoke. ‘I know the name—he runs smuggling rings all over the continent, Japan, the UK, Siberia, Turkey, and everywhere else. We all knew about him in the army.’ He glanced across at his father. ‘Some officers were making a fortune on the side, selling stuff on the black market. They would be assigned to guard a defunct nuclear facility or a pharmaceutical plant and they would sell uranium or plutonium or drugs or whatever out the back door to Dragoman and his men.’

‘How high up did this go?’ Stevie hugged her knees to her chest.

‘I would guess all the way to the top.’ Vadim shrugged. ‘There was too much money changing hands for it have remained of no interest to the higher-ups.’ Stevie nodded, hugging her knees tighter and staring at the flickering flames in front of her. ‘The trade in fake or expired pharmaceuticals is a huge business. And I can think of at least three rogue governments who would pay fortunes for nuclear materials or even weapons, not to mention any number of terrorist organisations, provided they could afford it.’

‘Surely it’s not that easy . . .’ Kozkov looked horrified and Stevie was surprised he didn’t seem to be aware of it.

‘The beauty of this black market,’ she explained, ‘lies in its deniability: the army report, say, a nuclear warhead as stolen and then launder the proceeds through Niue or Nauru or Tuvalu or some other Pacific Island micro-state, for example. Even if the warhead is found and traced, no one can be held officially responsible for the “stolen” goods, and there is no money trail to follow.’

‘And that’s where the banks come in,’ Kozkov said, the pieces coming together in his mind.

‘And therefore you.’

He sat forward, his eyes too drawn by the flames. ‘Trouble is, there are so many banks, so many under investigation, so many I have already closed down. It just doesn’t narrow it down enough.’

‘Maxim Krutchik was certain that Dragoman has binding ties to the siloviki, that they’re taking cuts of his profits in exchange for favourable legislation, or for turning a blind eye,’ Stevie informed Kozkov, her voice quiet. ‘He thinks a man like Dragoman might be interested in influencing you.’

Kozkov frowned in concentration. ‘If this Dragoman is tied to the siloviki in that way, then they would both have an interest in making sure a system of laundering profits through the banks was in place. It widens the circle of suspicion even further.’

‘So, is Maraschenko working for Dragoman?’ Vadim’s eyes were glowing in the firelight.

Kozkov replied, his voice hollow now. ‘We don’t even know Dragoman is in this picture yet.’ He directed his next words to Stevie.

‘He is just a name you tell me is being whispered in the underworld.

You also say that Maraschenko is most likely an opportunist. He saw his chance with Anya and took it off his own initiative. But is all this guesswork helpful?’ He pulled his forelock, staring into the fire. ‘How do we know Dragoman or the siloviki have anything at all to do with Anya?’

From the corner, Irina spoke, her eyes fixed on the tapestry in her lap. ‘We are not investigating. I don’t care who took Anya. All that matters is that we follow the instructions and get her back safely.’

Irina was right. Anya’s safe return was the only thing that mattered. The rest—truth and justice—was garnish.

Suddenly, Irina stopped sewing and looked up. ‘Listen. Shh . . . can you hear that?’

They all stillled. There was only the crackle of the fire. Saskia stood up, the hair on her neck rising.

‘What is it, Irina?’ Stevie barely whispered. Could the house be under surveillance? Had Rice kept his men on
after all? Was someone else out there?

Then it came, the long hollow howl of a wolf. The sound crept in around them like a low wind. It was, even as they sat safe around the house fire, a lonely and frightening sound. They listened as the invisible wolf howled in wave after wave, building up to some sort of crescendo.

‘She’s hungry.’ Vadim spoke normally. ‘I’ve heard the howls before, when we were in the Caucasus. It’s a hungry she-wolf. She’s probably calling the pack to help her hunt. She must have found tracks.’

Vadim kept his face turned to the window, staring at nothing. ‘This area was known for its wolf packs. In particularly hard winters, the wolves would get so hungry they would try to bring down the horses pulling the sleighs.

‘The sleigh would flee as fast as it could from the pack,’ Vadim continued, his voice as flat as the white plains outside, ‘hoping to outrun it. The horses would get too tired to outrun the wolves, no matter how frightened they were. So the footman would begin to throw some of the luggage off to lighten the load. Still the wolf pack would gain on the fleeing sleigh.

‘When all the luggage was gone and there was nothing left to throw, they would pick the most dispensable person—usually a young servant girl, or perhaps the footman—and thrown them off the back of the sleigh. The person would fall straight into the path of the wolves.’

No one could speak when the story finished, and Stevie knew she was not the only one in the room who saw Anya’s face on Vadim’s servant girl.

‘How far away do you think she is?’ Stevie’s voice was as soft as the falling snow.

Kozkov poked a fallen log back into the fire. ‘Not very.’

Stevie was woken the next morning by sweet Saskia sniffing her chin.

She reached out and stroked the gentle hunter’s sleek head. Outside it was still dark. The starlight, reflected and magnified ten thousand times in the ice crystals of the snow, cast an eerie glow in the pre-dawn. Stevie lay still, wishing today was not the day that they would take the life of a teenage girl into their hands.

After dressing, she made a pot of strong coffee and re-set the fire, then stared out into the grey snow. A low-lying fog surrounded the dacha like a petticoat, creeping up the windows and hovering there.

With a start, she noticed a man walking towards her through the snow. He was carrying a torch and his lower body was obscured by the fog. The flames lit the mist around him and he seemed almost to float, legless, through it.

It was Valery Kozkov.

A raven began to caw, then another. Stevie was surprised that birds would sing (could you call it that? They sounded more like angry children . . . ) in the darkness. Perhaps the star-lit blush of the snow had been enough to disturb them. She caught sight of one perching in the bare branches above Kozkov, watching him. It was as big as a cat.

Kozkov stamped his boots on the verandah. ‘I couldn’t sleep— went out to look for wolf tracks,’ he explained. ‘I wanted to take Saskia but she was hiding from me. Didn’t like the idea of wolves, I suppose.’ He cast a reproving eye on the animal, lying happily at Stevie’s feet by the fire. Stevie did not blame Saskia.

‘She was keeping me company. Did you find any tracks?’

Kozkov shook his head. ‘But it snowed a little last night, enough to cover them a bit, and the fog makes them harder to spot.’

Stevie poured him a cup of boiling coffee; Kozkov filled it with sugar. ‘I can’t seem to shake the feeling that we are being watched,’ he said.

‘Is that why you went out?’

He nodded. ‘I wanted to see if I could find anything but—nothing . . . I hate feeling trapped, helpless. I am never powerless but in this . . .’

‘It’s exactly what the kidnappers want you to feel, Valery,’ Constantine said, entering the room with soft steps. ‘They want to make you feel powerless so that you will do whatever they say and not think you have any choice.’ Stevie was grateful for Constantine’s presence and poured him his coffee. He drank, seeming not to notice it was scalding hot. ‘From what you and Stevie have told me, these men may not just want money. The persuasion factor is even more important to them.’

Stevie stood by the door and watched Saskia run out into the snow to sniff about and do her morning business. It was breathtakingly cold, the frozen purple landscape could have belonged to the moon or a distant star.
of nature was on display and Stevie had never seen anything like it. It helped her faith to gaze out upon the frozen crystals, the pale silver trees, the happy dog.

_Things will be alright in the end._

Saskia came bounding up the steps and dropped something with a clunk at Stevie’s feet. It looked like a stick of wood. Stevie bent to pick it up and throw it. As her hand touched it, she realised it was a dead mole, frozen solid. The poor creature, its little body stiff under the soft fur, tiny eyes welded shut—it must have somehow got caught outside its burrow. You didn’t usually find moles out in winter. Stevie picked it up carefully between two fingers and buried it in the snow at the bottom of the verandah. As she patted down the snow, she hoped that it wasn’t a bad omen.

At midday the satellite phone rang. Everyone was ready, but it startled them nonetheless. Kozkov let it ring twice then picked it up.

‘Ya slushayu. I’m listening.’

Constantine pushed a pad of paper and a pencil closer to him. Kozkov was to write down what was being said so Constantine could see. Clues to whom he might be speaking to could be important. He picked up the pencil and wrote: _Ukrainian._

So, not Maraschenko on the phone.

‘Let me speak to Anya—how do I know she is still alive? That you even have her?’

Good, thought Stevie, Kozkov’s voice was calm.

‘I can’t continue this without the proof. You will understand my position, surely.’

‘Be reasonable,’ Constantine had urged him. ‘Don’t show anger or fear.’

Kozkov wrote: _Voice odd—out of breath?
Constantine returned: Top guy?
Kozkov nodded.
Good!

This Constantine underlined.

‘Please, just let me hear Anya’s voice. It’s not an unreasonable request,’ Kozkov repeated.

This would help ascertain if Anya was being held elsewhere or wherever the speaker was.

Unexpectedly, Kozkov’s face cracked, lit up in pain and eagerness.

‘Anya! Have they hurt you? My darling . . .
She’s there! he wrote frantically.

‘We’re going to get you home, I swear on my life, Anyushka—’ Stevie felt relief. They had a proof of life—the girl was still alive.

Kozkov looked at Constantine, the knuckles of his hand white where he held the phone. ‘Will you speak with a friend of the family? He is acting on my behalf in this—’ Kozkov waited for the answer and shook his head at Constantine.

They would speak only to Kozkov.

He was listening intently, then he said, ‘I understand.’

_Impossible!_ he wrote on the pad.

‘These measures . . . I’m not sure they can be reversed. It takes time but—’ Kozkov listened some more, then his whole face hardened like a ghastly plaster cast.

‘You can’t do that.’ His voice had shrunken to a whisper now.

‘My God. You can’t do that.’ He went to write on the pad but the pencil snapped in his fingers and they began to shake uncontrollably.

‘Please, no.’

The receiver went limp in his hand. The man on the other end had terminated the phone call.

Nobody could move.

Then, ‘Irina?’ Valery’s voice was hoarse. ‘I spoke to her.’

Tears were running down Irina’s face.

‘She sounds alright.’ He was trying to reassure his wife but the blood had not returned to his face and he wouldn’t
meet Irina’s eyes. He looked awful.

Kozkov placed the telephone, the only connection he now had with his daughter, back on the table with heartbreaking gentleness. ‘The man sounded . . . he seemed to be panting for breath . . . asthmatic.’

‘What did he say?’ Stevie tried to control the trembling in her voice.

Kozkov moved to the window and gazed out. ‘He said Anya was unharmed and that nothing would happen to her as long as I did what he asked.’

The ravens were now three, still on the branch outside.

‘He asked me to reverse my banking reforms, re-open the banks, unfreeze the assets.’

But Kozkov still hadn’t answered the question everyone was silently asking. Saskia whimpered and went to him.

‘He said he was going to keep Anya. He was going to keep her as his safeguard.’

‘What do you mean, keep her? For how long?’ Irina was trying hard to pull her voice back from the edge of hysteria.

‘It could take years.’

There would be no bargaining or deals now, just an insidious vice tightening around the family.

It was Vadim who broke the horrified deadlock in the room.

‘What do we do now?’ he asked Constantine.

‘This is now a hostage situation,’ the negotiator’s voice was flat.

‘You’re going to have to mount a search-and-rescue operation. You will need to involve the authorities.’

There was nothing else for it. Waiting was not an option.

‘The authorities?’ Vadim’s voice was high, sarcastic. ‘You mean the police? The secret service? Perhaps the army?’

His father turned back from the window. ‘What else can we do?’

We are powerless. The demons have no intention of giving Anya back.

We need to hunt for her and we can’t do that without the cooperation of the FSB.’

He lit a cigarette and turned his gaze back to the window. ‘The matter is out of our hands. It is the right thing to do.’

For a moment no one said a word. Then Vadim exploded.

‘How can you dare even say that? How can you stand there and blow smoke and wash your hands of the matter?! Trust in the authorities— the right thing to do? The right thing to do?! Ha!’ He spat like a viper into the fire.

When he spoke again, his voice was thick, bloody. ‘Let me remind you, Papa, what the authorities think is “the right thing to do”.’ Vadim ripped off his jumper and began unbuttoning his shirt.

‘Vadim,’ Kozkov spoke sharply, but his son took no notice. He opened the left side of his shirt wide.

The young skin of his chest was deformed by a mass of scarred flesh, the kind of mark that is left by a deep burn. The scar was shaped like a ring, about the size of a large grapefruit. The inside was burnt in a pattern of sorts . . . Stevie realised with horror that it was the mark of a brand.

Vadim removed his shirt completely and turned to show his back. It was pocked with dark marks that Stevie immediately recognised as cigarette burns. Other scars were faintly visible on his white skin, around the ribs and kidneys. He had the torso of a prisoner of some horrible war. She reminded herself that Vadim was only eighteen.

‘The military.’ Vadim’s head was bent, his eyes hidden.

‘Which military?’ Stevie swallowed. ‘Were you a prisoner somewhere?’ She tried to think of where Vadim could have fallen into the hands of savage fighters. Chechnya?

‘Military service. I went in with skin as pure as yours and came out—like this.’ His smile was bitter, twisting up the corner of his mouth.

‘Were you sent to Chechnya?’

Kozkov was holding his forehead, his head bowed.

‘I was,’ Vadim replied in a low voice. ‘But it wasn’t the rebels who did this. It was my commanding officer, the officers of the Russian army.’ Vadim shrugged his shirt back on and lit a cigarette. Stevie noticed his left hand was trembling.
'The same “authorities” that now my father wants to get to help Anya.’

‘They aren’t all like that, Vadim.’ Kozkov stretched a hand out towards his son. ‘There are some good men who still hold on to ideals of service—the patriots. If everyone believed that the authorities—’

‘What? That the authorities are corrupt and violent?’ The heat was back in Vadim’s voice. ‘Everyone knows that already. You don’t remember giving me exactly the same reasoning when I came to you with my papers that day and asked for your help?’

‘Vadim,’ Kozkov’s eyes held pure heartbreak, ‘I didn’t know what was going to happen to you.’

‘You did,’ he accused, unforgiving. ‘I told you the reputation of that platoon and what had happened to my friend Sergei under the same officers. You even met his mother, Milla, who had a funeral for her son’s skull because no one seems to know where the rest of the body is.’

Vadim turned to Stevie. ‘In the official explanation—when Milla finally got one—they said Sergei died of “heart failure”. Everyone knows he was beaten to death by his superiors, drunk, bored—they did it just for fun.’

‘I thought I was doing the right thing, Vadim.’ Kozkov was shaking his head. ‘If people would only return to the ideas of duty and service and strength in adversity, Russia could be saved from total ruin. I still believe that now. But how could I publicly promote these values and then, privately, use my influence to protect my son from the difficulties of the same?’

Kozkov turned away from his son, his back bowed in defeat.

‘My enemies would have screamed hypocrisy, it would have broken my bond of trust with the citizens. They need to trust the head of the Central Bank. With their trust, I have the power to do something real to stop us all sinking into this morass of rot and corruption. Can you see I had no choice?’

Vadim’s eyes burned at his father’s back; he struggled to keep his voice steady. ‘What I see is that you chose to sacrifice me to your ideals and you proved nothing. You could have had me transferred, you could have spoken out about Sergei, you could have asked questions about what happens to Russian conscripts. But you did nothing. Fine. I survived, you got your chance to change the world. But I won’t let you do the same to Anya. If you make the same choice now, I will never forgive you.’

There was a long, deep silence, all words buried by the horror—by the snow and the desperation that surrounded them all.

Finally Kozkov spoke. ‘Vadim is right. My fight for Russia is over.

Now I must fight for my family. I will retire immediately, become useless to my enemies.’

Constantine shook his head; Stevie spoke for him. ‘If you do that, you’ll make the men now holding Anya very angry. They will kill her just to show you that you can’t win. It’s not an option, Valery, I’m sorry. Anya is only safe while you are still useful to them.’

The sound of Kozkov’s fist smashing through the window surprised them all. He pulled his bloody hand back without another sound and thundered out of the dacha into the deep snow. From inside, they watched him fight through the drifts, running towards the birches, floundering like a man unspooling.

Then came a howl of rage that could have belonged to another wolf but this time belonged to a man.

Saskia slipped out after him. Stevie could see her sniffing anxiously at the garnet trail left in the snow by her master’s bleeding hand. She stepped daintily, not sinking, carefully and methodically choosing her way.

Sound in the snow is muffled. The tiny droplets of moisture in the air that usually help carry noise from the source are frozen. That’s why it always seems so quiet in a blizzard. But they could still make out Kozkov’s words, and the strain of hysteria and frustration in his voice.

‘Take me, you predators!’ He splayed his arms like a man ready to be crucified. ‘I’m the one you want. Take me, you wolves!’ he screamed into the birch forest.

When there was no reply from the forest or the mist or the frozen hills, Kozkov began shouting at himself. He blamed himself for everything that had happened. At one point he raised his bleeding hand towards the sky in a gesture of despair that would have been melodramatic had it not been so awfully genuine.

Stevie felt terrible watching a man in agony, seeing his mind collapse. She was intruding on a most private pain. She found she couldn’t make herself walk out to him.

In the end it was Irina who left the room. Stevie watched Saskia run in grateful circles around her as she climbed through the snow, stepping carefully in her husband’s footprints.

Irina called out to him in a silvery voice that carried. ‘Valera.’ She went straight to him and embraced him tightly,
pinning his arms to his sides.

Stevie turned away from the window as the two parents wept, clasped together and rocking like a ship in a wild sea.

Later that evening, they were all sitting around the fire, the bottle of whisky on the table almost empty. Stevie couldn’t shake the image of Vadim’s milky skin twisted with the hot pink and brown welts of the brand. Why were the officers so brutal with their charges? Perhaps it made a twisted sense: if you want to dehumanise a man, it is easier to begin with the boy. Youth is malleable, soft, more ready to take the impression of things brought to bear on it; the young are more eager to please. The officers of the Russian army had obviously understood this well; the Chechen fighters had, too. Suffering done unto them; suffering done unto others—that way the cycle of pain was never broken. Isn’t that what they wanted? Stevie wanted to see the scars again, ask more questions, but now wasn’t the time.

Kozkov had calmed down but his face—drained and drawn—showed the toll the afternoon had taken on him. He looked smaller, older and more fragile. His hand had been carefully bandaged by Irina, and she was now sitting close by his side. Even Vadim seemed spent. They hadn’t eaten since breakfast and no one felt they could now.

‘Vadim, I am going to fix this. I am making this a promise to you.’

Kozkov laid his bandaged hand on Saskia’s head. He spoke softly, almost to himself. ‘They steal my daughter, I become compliant, too afraid to tell anyone she is missing, so no one knows officially. I back off the banks, Anya is returned and there is no evidence of coercion or corruption. I never forget how vulnerable I am. I lose the will to fight.’

He raised his head and looked at Stevie. ‘But perhaps they underestimate what I am capable of. Choosing the path for good is not a preordained destiny; it is a conscious and difficult decision. My enemies think my idealism makes me weak. Perhaps I will surprise them.’ Kozkov turned his whisky glass slowly in his good hand, the amber liquid catching the fire from the candles. ‘Since I took my position at the bank, I have been quietly investigating “gifts” from both oligarchs and organised crime bosses, to parliamentary committee members considering banking reforms.’ He directed this to Stevie and Constantine. ‘I have names, details, irrefutable evidence. No one knows about this list. But there are names on it that might convince elements of the FSB that Anya ought to be found quickly and safely.’

Constantine shifted in his seat, his black eyes bright. ‘You think the secret police are involved in Anya’s kidnapping?’

Kozkov put his glass down and lit his hundredth cigarette. ‘Not directly. They prefer killing. But little goes on in Russia without their knowledge. Sometimes they can’t or won’t act; sometimes they do, and with great efficiency. I plan to offer a stick and a carrot, as they say.’

Stevie didn’t like the sound of his carrot and stick. ‘What do you mean exactly?’

‘Very carefully, I will put the word out about the list and that I am prepared to make it public to the world. Someone will get nervous and turn.’

‘If you alarm them, Anya could disappear forever.’ Stevie said it softly, half hoping Irina wouldn’t hear her. ‘All I can try to do is put pressure where I suspect it might have an effect.’ Kozkov looked at Irina, then Vadim. ‘If giving up my position won’t get a result, I am going to do everything in my power—scrupulous or not—to get Anya back. Even if it means blackmail.’

‘I think the threats could backfire,’ Stevie persisted, feeling increasingly nervous about Kozkov’s reasoning and his state of mind. ‘There are men in the FSB whom even the mafia treat with respect—they haven’t forgotten a thing they learned in the KGB. It could be very dangerous for you.’

Kozkov shook his head slowly. ‘Vadim is right. I should have done more to protect my family. Anya is still somewhere out there and I have to find her.’ He reached over and took Irina’s small hand in his, his eyes on Stevie. ‘I think it’s better I handle this alone from now on. I know the Kremlin, I know its people. Thank you both for trying to help us. Stevie, your efforts are appreciated, but they are no longer enough. It’s time you and Constantine went home.’

Stevie flushed to her roots, embarrassed. She nodded to Kozkov and took a long sip of her whisky, hoping it would compose her voice. ‘I understand and I apologise. I’m sorry we couldn’t do more—that I couldn’t do more. I really am.’

She meant every word and more. Se felt shame and a deep sense of inadequacy at not having been judged up to the mark. Nothing she had done had helped get Anya back so far. And she hated knowing that David Rice would
find out she had failed, Henning also.

She put her glass down and forced herself to look at Anya’s father. ‘Is there nothing left for me to do?’

But Kozkov fixed his eyes on the fire and said nothing.

**Stevie went to her room** to pack. She didn’t feel like sitting around the fire with Anya’s mother and brother, drinking the Kozkov’s whisky, returning nothing but disappointment. She preferred to stay hidden in her room.

Sometime later—it was hard to keep track of time . . . it seemed always to be twilight—Saskia came in, followed by Vadim. He sat at the foot of her bed like a ghost, cradling the dog. He looked thinner than ever.

‘It’s my fault my father said those things to you.’ He didn’t look at Stevie. ‘I upset him with the things I accused him of. What I said was true, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe now I’ve pushed him to do something he shouldn’t. I just don’t know . . . I don’t know what he is going to do.’

‘I can’t help.’ Stevie pulled at the coverlet. ‘I thought I could but really . . . I’m sorry if I gave you all false hope.’

‘You found out about Petra, and Gregori Maraschenko, and Felix Dragoman . . .’ Vadim trailed off.

Stevie shook her head. ‘I’ll be leaving Moscow as soon as I get back to the city. I’m going back to the assignment I’m supposed to be on.’

‘I wish you would stay.’

Stevie felt a rush of gratitude for Vadim’s kindness but she knew in her heart that Kozkov was right and that she had no place any longer in this business.

‘Your father seems confident he knows what he’s doing.’

‘I think you’re lying, Stevie.’ Vadim was looking at her now with those pale-fire eyes of his. ‘You think he’s doing the wrong thing. I can see it in your face.’

She did think that. ‘It’s dangerous—but I have no right to stop him, or even advise him otherwise. What I think doesn’t matter—and I could very well be wrong. Your father is Anya’s best hope. I truly believe that.’

Vadim said nothing for a moment then said suddenly, ‘There is someone that maybe you should see. Anya’s godfather, Kirril. He lives in Zurich. We can’t mention his name in front of Papa—we’re not allowed to speak to him—but I think he calls Anya sometimes in secret.’

‘Why aren’t you allowed to talk to him?’ Hadn’t both Galina and Irina mentioned a godfather . . . ?

‘He and my father were very close. Something happened—they had a huge fight years ago and Papa said he didn’t want the influence of a traitor and a coward in his children’s lives. I don’t know what Kirril did. But he might know something.’
Srovie arranged to be on a flight out of Shermetyevo airport to Kloten, Zurich, as soon as possible. She had been in contact with David who was to meet her for lunch when she landed in Switzerland. He was in town for a meeting with his bank manager and would brief her on the details of the next stage of the Hammer-Belle assignment.

She knew she should look in on Henning when she got to Moscow. He was still recuperating in his hospital bed, healthy and healing, but under ‘observation’ on account of the injury being a blow to the head. She hadn’t spoken to him since arriving at the dacha but certainly by now Kozkov would have phoned him and he would know she had been fired.

Srovie felt too mortified to see him. So she organised for a large food hamper of caviar and melba toast to be sent to his room. She had thought about adding a bunch of white *cymbidium* orchids, but she then she remembered their secret language of flowers conversation. Did white orchids have a special hidden meaning? All she could recall was that mushrooms meant suspicion and she somehow didn’t feel that would be entirely appropriate, given the circumstances. It was too risky to let anything bloom accidentally, with an unintended message. Too risky, in fact, to let anything bloom at all . . . Stevie was trained to avoid dangers that may lie ahead; she would do so now. Leaving Moscow, and Henning, was the only possible course of action. She thought better of it and simply included a bottle of very fine whisky instead. The note on the hamper simply said ‘Stevie’.

At the airport, Stevie found herself scanning the face of every teenage girl she saw, almost as if she might spot Anya.

It’s over, Stevie. Let it go.

But it was hard to not think about Anya Kozkov, still captive, no doubt terrified, who knew where. She just hoped Kozkov’s plan was not as rash as it seemed.

By two o’clock, Stevie was sitting at one of the few small tables at the Kropf Bierhalle, one of the oldest Bürgher houses in the Alt Stadt, the ancient part of town. It was furnished with the traditional dark wood tables and leadlight windows, but the ceiling was double height and painted with extraordinary bacchanalian scenes involving cupids, wheat sheaves and huge bunches of grapes.

Srovie had always taken it as evidence of just how much the old Zürcher Bürgher had loved their beer. The white veal sausages particular to Zurich were exceptionally good at the Kropf, especially with a dollop of hot mustard and a side of the flattened potato *Rösti*.

Srovie was starving. She had had two helpings of the Swissair breakfast on the flight out from Moscow but she was ready for lunch. It was something that always surprised her—just how good airline food tasted after Russia.

She hoped David wouldn’t be late. The Bahnhof Strasse was just around the corner. In fact the biggest gold deposit in Switzerland was right under the Paradeplatz tram station. All those commuting feet and tram wheels and cars passing so casually over the billions of bullion. Switzerland was like that, all efficiency and discretion. The casual visitor would remain oblivious to most of the country’s most important structures. Why advertise them? There was safety in stealth. That was something Stevie was always trying to impress upon her clients. A few of them listened; many didn’t.

Srovie caught sight of David’s broad silhouette as he walked in and went to hang his navy blue cashmere overcoat. He made his way over, limping slightly, a hand on his ebony cane.

David Rice was no longer a very dangerous man but the sense of possibility hung about him still. The cane seemed to be there as a precaution, the way a lion might be made to wear a chain for the safety of passers-by. It highlighted his strength rather than his vulnerability.

‘Thinner than usual, a patchy tan, and a fat lip . . . ’ He raised a thick grey eyebrow as Stevie stood to greet him.
‘You look like hell. Not that I’m surprised. A week in the mountains will do you good.’
‘Ski holiday, is it?’

Rice smiled but his eyes looked concerned as he ran them over Stevie’s face. ‘Alexander Yudorov is throwing a party in St Moritz. He plans to play in the polo-on-ice tournament this year and he wants everyone there to watch.’

‘Yudorov . . . ’ Stevie searched her mental data base of Russian oligarchs. He had the aluminium mines of Siberia and most of Russia’s media. He was big.

‘Is he that good?’ she asked, surprised. ‘The Cartier Cup is played by high-goal teams.’

‘From what I hear, he’s afraid of horses—no, he’s pretty much bought Urs Schwarzenbach’s old polo team and he
plans to cheer them to victory from the comfort of one of the tents.’

The waitress arrived and they ordered veal sausages and a carafe of red wine. Rice waited until she had left the table then continued. ‘The Hammer-Belles have been invited to stay at his chalet and watch the match. From what I hear, it sounds like it’s going to be quite a lavish affair.’

‘More Russians.’ Stevie wanted to groan but was luckily distracted by the arrival of the wine.

‘Have a good glass of this, Stevie—put some fire back into your blood.’

Stevie obediently took the glass, hoping the subject of her bungled escapade would magically elude David.

‘Constantine told me what happened, Stevie.’

She swallowed a mouthful of wine. ‘Kozkov sent me home with my tail between my legs, his daughter still in the hands of the kidnappers.’ She fought back a most humiliating tear and stared defiantly at Rice, almost daring him to pour his heaviest scorn on her.

David fixed her with his grey eyes for a moment. ‘Well for God’s sake, don’t lose your appetite over it.’

Stevie hadn’t touched the sausage.

‘Look, Stevie,’ his voice was rough with the concern that didn’t show on his face. ‘You can’t win them all. You’re well out of that one. You were a little fool to get involved in the first place.’

Stevie looked down at her hands, her eyes pricking again. Tears certainly wouldn’t do. She bit her lip to concentrate herself and forced herself to look Rice in the eye.

He held her gaze gently. ‘Maybe the girl will be found safely without you—Kozkov’s plan might work . . . the thing is, you can do no more. Hundreds of girls disappear this way in Russia every year. My advice—maybe you’d call it harsh but I am a realistic man—is concentrate on the ones you can do something about.’

Stevie picked up her knife and cut rather viciously into the sausage. ‘Did you find out anything about the Ukrainian?’

Rice gave a sharp glance at the table nearest to them—an elderly couple eating Zürcher Geschnetzeltes mit Rösti. They were too far away to hear anything. He sat back in his chair. ‘Felix Dragoman, born in Chernobyl, Ukraine, nineteen years before the accident. The bio’s pretty grim. His father worked at the reactor as an engineer, his mother cleaned it at night. Our man left school and got a job driving dangerous goods trucks in and out of the reactor grounds.’

Rice paused to refill their glasses.

‘Dragoman’s father was one of the thirty-five people who died instantly when the core of the reactor melted in April, 1986. He was inside the plant. Dragoman’s brother was one of the firemen sent in to put out the fire.’

‘Didn’t they get sent in wearing paper masks and Wellington boots?’ Stevie remembered seeing terrifying pictures of the clean-up crews at ground zero.

Rice reached for his glass but didn’t drink just yet. ‘The Soviets just threw the rescue workers on the fire like buckets of sand—and don’t tell me they didn’t know they were sending the men to their deaths!’

Rice had cast his warrior soul during the Cold War and it showed every now and then. Stevie liked it when it did. Why? Maybe it revealed a passion that appeared to be absent in the everyday David Rice. It made her feel closer to him.

‘Anyway,’ Rice took a swallow of wine and continued, ‘the brother died shortly afterwards. Dragoman was watching a victory parade that was staged through Chernobyl only a few hours after the accident. Classic Soviet stuff—they couldn’t tell anyone that there had been a terrible accident. They had orders to hide everything. And so the victory parade had to go on, as scheduled.’

The waitress cleared their plates—Stevie had relaxed during Rice’s story and managed to eat everything. They ordered espresso.

When the coffee arrived, Rice stirred far too much sugar into the tiny cup and lit a thin cigar. ‘The people of the USSR were all a huge experiment. How would their bodies react to massive radiation? Could the men in charge get away with mass poisoning, as they had got away with mass killings only the generation before? Anyhow,’ Rice got back to business, ‘the Soviets built a special town for all the displaced people of Chernobyl. It’s called Slavutich. Dragoman and his mother were moved there. No one was allowed to take anything with them. They had to start their lives from scratch. That’s when he started trading on the black market, making secret trips into the Dead Zone and taking what he knew he could sell on.’

Stevie sipped her coffee; she was feeling a lot better—the effect David Rice always seemed to have on her. ‘Is
there anything you didn’t find out? What did you do, take his best friend for tea?’

Rice sent an eyebrow skyward and almost smiled. ‘Something like that. You know what London’s like—you
can’t throw a teaspoon without hitting a disgruntled Russian exile.’ Then he grew serious again. ‘Dragoman’s
mother developed tumours and died ten years later. Dragoman was left with a large bald patch on the side of his
head in the shape of a perfect crescent moon. Apparently the hair has never grown back.’

‘That should make him quite easy to spot in a crowd.’

‘From the pictures I’ve seen, it wouldn’t take a bald crescent.’

‘The Man from Chernobyl.’ Stevie frowned. ‘Do you think he calls himself that?’

‘From what I hear, he’s quite proud of the moniker. His operations grew from smuggling radioactive salvage from
Chernobyl, to selling rocket-propelled grenade launchers to the Afghans during the war, then, when the Soviet
Union collapsed, he moved on to stripping reactors and old army bases of weaponry and materials he could sell
around the world.’

‘So, how does he do it?’

‘Dragoman began by buying up small transport companies and now has the largest fleet of Soviet-era planes in
the world. They operate pretty much with impunity in developing-world airspace because it is so poorly monitored.
Ownership and operations are obscured by complex corporate structures. Dragoman promises the reliability that you
would expect from a multinational company, in a black economy: he delivers the right goods, on time, at the agreed
price, to absolutely anywhere in the world. This makes him invaluable to interests more powerful than Afghan
warlords or gem smugglers.’

‘Kozkov’s son Vadim knew about Dragoman from his military service,’ Stevie broke in. ‘He says Dragoman does
a roaring trade in pharmaceuticals.’

‘Wouldn’t surprise me. Pharma—especially fake pharma—is huge right now, especially given the emergence of
Chinese markets, both as end users and as manufacturers. It’s easy money—sell cement dust as expensive, life-
saving medication—you can’t lose, economically. And if you’re clever enough to do it indirectly, it’s very hard to
get caught.’

Stevie was silent. Her mind was whirling with thoughts. When she finally looked up, Rice was staring at her. He
looked away. ‘I relayed all that because I promised you I would ask around. Now that Dragoman and the Kozkovs
can no longer be of interest to you, I hope you can keep your mind on the job at hand.’

‘Of course, David.’ She forced her mind back to the present. ‘What do the Hammer-Belles need?’

‘They want you with them in St Moritz. Yudorov has discouraged his guests from bringing more than one
bodyguard per person but he has promised the couple top-notch security and his best men during their stay. They
have one of their own men and I suggested Owen Dovetail as well. They agreed, provided you went along too—just
to make sure things were taken care of properly.’ He cast an amused glance at her.

‘You made quite an impression on them, it seems.’

‘I can’t think why!’

‘It’ll keep you out of mischief. And I need you to go. The Hammer-Belles are turning out to be very good clients
and I’d like to keep them safe and happy.’

‘Has anything come up with the Romanians?’

Rice shook his handsome, grizzled head. ‘So far we’ve found little evidence of anything. We’ve tracked a few
dubious characters to Gstaad and we’re watching them closely but so far, nothing concrete.’

Rice ordered two Armagnacs and handed one to Stevie. ‘Trouble is, news of the Yudorov shindig has been
splashed all over the place, which means we could get amateurs as well as pros tempted to have a crack at them. I
haven’t mentioned the possible plot to the Hammer-Belles—they know Nadia Swarovski personally and she seems
to have them scared stiff with her stories about the Romanian kidnapping gang making off with her boyfriend in
Megève last year. I don’t want them alarmed unnecessarily.’

‘I understand,’ Stevie nodded slowly. ‘I’ll be discreet in what I say to them. I’ve got a friend up in St Moritz who
always has his ear to the ground. It might be worth popping up a day or so early so I can see what’s going on.’

‘Best leave tomorrow morning then.’ Rice seemed pleased. He paid the bill with a thousand-franc note. The
waitress didn’t blink.

‘In London the cabbies baulk at a twenty-pound note,’ he grunted, shrugging on his overcoat. ‘Here, even the
newsagents have change for a thousand. Much more civilised really. And it means you only have to carry around
one or two notes.’

Stevie saw he had at least twenty of the pale grey bills in his money clip today. She knew he would have a lot more stashed away somewhere.

David Rice believed in cash, and in Swiss banks. He helped Stevie with her coat. ‘Call London for anything else you need. Josie’s expecting you.’

He handed her two thousand-franc notes. ‘By the way, you’re going to need to look the part up there, to blend in a little more. Get those furry boots they all wear, the ones that look like you have a foot up a Pomeranian’s backside.’

He chuckled at Stevie’s horrified expression. ‘You’ll live. You might even have some fun.’

Then he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and was gone.

The small gesture of affection did more for Stevie’s spirits than the wine, the food or the francs. When David was safely out of sight, she put her hand to her cheek and smiled.

It had not been difficult to find Kirril. He turned out to be the rather famous conductor of the Zurich Opera House Orchestra, performing that night at the Opernhaus, a beautiful edifice on the shores of the Zürichsee.

Stevie bought her ticket over the telephone then set off wearing all her pearls and her astrakhan pillbox hat. She had also painted her lips scarlet, which she rarely did, but she knew artists liked colour. It was too early to go to the opera house, but she had decided to take a walk around the Old Town, to re-calibrate her compass and to try to slip back into her life.

The night was icy and still, the cobblestones on the narrow streets shone an oily midnight blue. People hurried about their business, the collars of their overcoats turned up, their breath puffing back in white streams. Looking down from the laneways above the Grossmünster cathedral, Stevie caught glimpses of the Limmat, flowing black and gold through the Old Town. She loved Zurich on a winter evening.

Right on time, she swept through the grand door of the opera house and took her seat, high up and to the left of the stage.

Kirril Marijinski was magnetic. He had wild grey hair that swept up and down like the surf with his more violent movements, and the music was splendid. It was, however, Kirril’s hands that mesmerised Stevie. They were pale and long-fingered, the most delicate hands she had ever seen on a man—perhaps on anyone. As he directed the orchestra, they fluttered like two white doves against the black of his tailcoat. They were a thing of heartbreaking beauty and yet there was something ever so slightly wrong about them. She couldn’t place it . . .

Stevie pulled out her mini-binoculars and watched Kirril’s face: handsome, intelligent, deeply furrowed. What had happened between him and Kozkov to get him banished from their lives?

She was waiting for him by the artists’ entrance at the end of the performance. He came striding out, accompanied by his first violinist and one of the clarinet players.

‘Izvinite pozhaluista—vi Kirril Marijinski?’

‘Da. Who are you?’

‘My name is Stevie Duveen. I am a friend of the Kozkovs.’

Kirril’s face froze. He waved the two musicians brusquely away and took a step towards Stevie.

‘So then, why are you speaking to me?’

‘Can we go somewhere warm, have a drink? I need to tell you something very important.’

Kirril stared hard into Stevie’s face for a moment then shrugged.

She led him quickly to the bar at the Kronenhalle—not far, just across the Bellevue Platz—before he could change his mind. The bar was full, warm, smoky, comfortable. Stevie realised she didn’t really know how to begin.

‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Kir Royale.’

‘I think I’ll join you.’ Stevie found crème de cassis a little sweet—she preferred her champagne plain—but choosing the same drink, like mimicking body language, helped people relax.

‘It’s about your goddaughter, Anya.’

Kirril’s eyes grew wary. He untied his bowtie and opened the top button on his shirt. Stevie wondered why he had
left his gloves on. Perhaps the hands were too precious to be unsheathed in social situations. You never knew with artists . . .

‘Vadim told me you two keep in touch. Mr Marijinsky, there is no easy way to tell you: Anya’s been kidnapped.’

Kirril’s face lost all colour. Stevie thought he might be sick. But he recovered himself and took a sip of his drink. Stevie continued, her eyes on his face. ‘She was taken while shopping with her friend at GUM. I work for a risk management company that specialises in this area. I was supposed to help get Anya back.’

Stevie took a gulp of her kir and swallowed. ‘The men holding her have demanded that Valery reverse his stance on the banks. I don’t know if you are aware that he has been—’ ‘I know what he has been doing!’ Kirril was suddenly furious.

‘I follow everything from here! And now the mad fool won’t give in!

I cannot believe he would sacrifice his daughter’s life to his damn principles!’

Stevie remembered Vadim saying the same thing at the dacha.

‘Valery is willing to do anything to get her back. The kidnappers said they are going to hold Anya until they are satisfied. Valery is desperate— I’m afraid he is about to do something very dangerous.’

‘You are advising him?’ Kirril’s magnificent head turned to her.

Stevie blushed. ‘He sent me home because I couldn’t help. Before I left, I promised Vadim I would talk to you. Please. Anything might help.’

‘You want to know what happened between us.’ Kirril drained his glass. Stevie quickly ordered him another, wanting to keep him talking.

‘Please,’ she whispered.

After a moment’s hesitation, Kirril began. ‘I used to live in Moscow. I conducted an orchestra there. One day two men came to see me in my dressing-room after a concert. They told me the man they worked for had enjoyed the concert very much and wanted to become my patron. In exchange for a large cash patronage, I would resign and leave with my best musicians. We would become his private minstrels. I at first laughed. The idea was quite mad. But the men were not joking. I then told them that I was happy where I was and that it was my belief that music was there to be shared with the public, and that none of my musicians would consent to having their talent locked away and kept for a handful of over-moneyed, overfed vulgarians. I was angry. The men left. I thought little more of it.’

Two fresh kir arrived. Kirril sipped again, his face still ashen. ‘One night after a concert, I was late leaving and I was alone in my dressing-room. The same two men reappeared, this time with their boss. He repeated his offer to me and again I completely refused. One of the men grabbed me and pinned my arm to the table. The other man—’ Kirril took off his gloves and laid his left hand on the table. His ring finger and pinkie had been severed at the knuckle.

‘Bolt cutters.’

Stevie choked back her gasp. The sight of those extraordinarily beautiful and expressive hands so mutilated made her feel sick.

‘The man was a mafiya boss,’ Kirril’s voice was low and rough. ‘I didn’t know it at the time. After that, I forgot my principles and I left Russia forever, taking my music and my musicians with me.’

They sat in silence for a long time, Stevie forcing herself to look at Kirril’s fingers, Kirril leaving them lying bare on the table for her to see. Finally she asked, ‘Was Valery angry that you left?’

Kirril shook his head. ‘Another man approached me, here in Zurich, a Siberian; his name doesn’t matter. He heard the story and he offered me protection. I didn’t even ask what he might want in return or what kind of man he was. I didn’t care. I accepted. I accepted because I was afraid.’

Kirril took his fingers off the table and pulled on his gloves. ‘Valery was so angry. He called my patron a criminal of the worst kind, said I was a coward. He thought I should have stayed, made my story public, fought for my freedom. But the price was too high for me. For Valery, no price is too high. This is what we fought about.’

‘Vadim . . .’ The name escaped Stevie’s lips, her mind turning to the memory of his scarred young torso.

‘Vadim, too. That boy has suffered.’

Stevie looked around. No one seemed out of place—two men arrived in deep-green Lodens, others milling at the bar dressed in the brown tweeds and corduroys of winter; the women in cashmere jumpers, jewels, painted lips—but you could never be sure if someone was listening.

‘If you’re warm enough,’ Stevie suggested, ‘shall we walk a little?’
Outside, a low fog had settled along the shores of the lake. The avenues of trees were crisscrossed with tiny lights hung in the shapes of stars and hearts; it felt like fairyland off-kilter. Stevie thought of the mangled hand nestling in Kirril Marijinsky’s overcoat pocket and breathed a lungful of the freezing black air.

She glanced over her shoulder before she spoke, but the shore was deserted. ‘Valery thinks he can get Anya back with blackmail.’

Their steps were now clanging in unison on the frozen concrete.

Stevie was trying to be careful not to say too much. What did she know of Kirril? Had she revealed too much already?

‘Ah,’ Kirril nodded and exhaled a puff of smoke. ‘The insurance policy. You’re talking about Valery’s list.’

‘List?’ Stevie asked cautiously.

‘He began compiling it years ago, when we were still as close as brothers, cataloguing the “gifts” bestowed on politicians assessing bank-sector reform, following the money that flowed in and out of the special slush fund they had set up especially. That list could do untold damage to many powerful people.’

Kirril stopped walking. Any trace of vulnerability from the bar had vanished. His eyes were hard now. ‘But you knew that already, Miss Duveen. What do you want from me? Why did you come here?’

‘I thought maybe . . .’ Stevie was no longer sure of anything, hovering in the dark grey mist, alone with Kirril on the edge of the frozen lake. She suddenly wished there were people about. ‘I’m just trying to help Anya,’ she said finally.

‘You are involving yourself in something that does not concern you and you are putting everyone in great danger.’

Stevie put a hand on Kirril’s arm. ‘Anya is already in great danger. You are her godfather—don’t you want to help her?’

‘Perhaps I would have—before everything happened.’ Kirril pulled his arm away. ‘But Anya belongs to another world now. There is nothing I can do.’

Stevie flushed with anger, her body hot and trembling at Kirril Marijinsky’s indifference. Any shred of fear fled. She wanted to slap him, but she kept her voice steady, her hands safely in her pockets.

‘You could go to your patron. He must have connections, beg him to help you.’

Kirril snorted. ‘And risk everything? My life is comfortable. I want to keep it that way.’

Stevie’s mind raced for a way to hold this man, this musical magician with doves for hands and a vanished heart.

‘Do the siloviki mean anything to you?’ Stevie saw the fear creep into Kirril’s eyes. ‘Do you know that half the names on Valery’s list belong to the siloviki? I’m going to guess the name of your patron is on it. When Valery makes that list public, my guess is the siloviki will turn on him, too. No one will be able to protect you. You should make your choice now and leave your world of fear and coercion. Don’t you want to be free again? Or was Valery right about you?’

Kirril turned his back on Stevie and began to walk away. He called out without turning around, already half-invisible in the fog, ‘Go home, Stevie Duveen.’

‘I am home, Mr Marijinsky,’ she called back.

‘Then go to hell.’

Decidedly unsuccessful, possibly downright stupid was Stevie’s assessment of her meeting with Kirril. There had been little to gain from the conversation. She could see now why he and Valery had fought.

There had been traces of what the old Kirril must have been like, but the men who had taken his fingers had taken much more than sinews and bone. They had shattered him. He had become an indifferent colluder with the forces of evil.

Was that too harsh?

Stevie thought of Anya and decided it was not. She still had a niggling worry that she had said too much—but it was Kirril who had brought up the list.

The train for Chur pulled into the Hauptbahnhof. Stevie dismissed her worries, swung her soft duffle bag over her shoulder and leapt aboard.

By eleven, she was settled in a window seat on the Glacier Express, en route to St Moritz. The little red train
chugged its ways through the valleys and peaks. When the sun shone, it was one of the most scenic journeys in the world, but today everything was half obscured by low cloud and dulled by a grey light.

The pretty alpine villages lay hidden, only their church steeples poking through the fog. The bare rock of the mountains loomed black and forbidding where it was too steep for snow to cling. Great icicles menaced the track like Damoclean swords.

Before the Alps had become a holidaymaker’s paradise, they had been the terror of travellers. Spurred by stories of wild mountain men and plague-ridden villages, travellers hurried through as fast as they could, hands on their purses and hearts in their mouths. On a day like today, it was easy to imagine what it had been like then. There were still many villages cut so deeply into steep valleys that the sun only ever reached them for a few days in mid-summer. These villages wouldn’t have noticed that it had been months since the sun had shone anywhere in Europe.

Stevie flicked through the pages of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. There was an article about some scientists in Poland who were heralding the coming of a new mini ice age. Many were publicly scoffing at their findings, saying they had it the wrong way around—that the planet was heating up—but looking out onto the glaciers, Stevie thought that the Europe she knew seemed only to be getting colder.

Another article, this time a scandal involving fake formula that had been imported from China and fed to babies in North Western Russia. Many had died as a result of malnutrition. The horror.

Stevie turned the page. It was too much to bear thinking about.

Another article, this time it was about the wildlife that was flourishing in the Dead Zone, after Chernobyl. The fact that no humans could live there due to the residual radiation meant the area had turned into a haven for all kinds of animals.

Stevie’s mind turned to The Man from Chernobyl. The accident had obviously changed Dragoman’s world. He had lost everything. In a way, she supposed, it must have shaped him or he wouldn’t have that nickname. She guessed April 1986 had probably shaped the lives of everyone who had lived through it.

The rocking motion of the train set her thoughts adrift as she stared at the blank white window. In a way, everyone became what they chose to be defined by: their manhood, an act of shame, of heroism, kindness, a humiliation, their mother’s country, the unfairness in their lives, an illness, their faith, an accident. In every person’s past and present and future, so many patchwork pieces were represented. As people chose to keep some things and to discard others, they set in motion a sorting process that gradually created their identities.

Tragedy and fortune weren’t distributed evenly through the world, Stevie thought; so few things were, not even sunlight. But in this way, while it wasn’t possible to change the past, it was possible to change the way it shaped us. Sometimes it was other people who branded us for easy consumption. The subtle patchwork disappeared, and we became one single, adjectival being: ‘poor Fatima’, ‘a strong man’, ‘a dark past’, ‘a good woman’. Perhaps sometimes it could seem like a comfort to have the burden of self-fashioning taken from our shoulders. The crude equation had then an equally crude answer that would satisfy a blunted mind: you are unhappy because—

But Stevie thought about how nothing was ever that simple, no matter how much we wanted it to be. The human mind had the power to create Heaven and Hell and all things in between. It was a gift and a burden, bestowed by God, the universe, by an accident of biology, to every person on the planet to use as they could.

Fortunately the conductor arrived to remind her that lunch was being served in the restaurant car and Stevie was able to turn her thoughts to the menu.

Over a Bündnerteller with pickles and a small carafe of red wine, Stevie read Josie’s notes on Alexander Nikolaievitch Yudorov and caught up on the Hammer-Belle situation.
The tea must have been drugged—just like the first time, at GUM.

Anya woke in degrees, slipping and sliding reluctantly towards consciousness. She knew without opening her eyes that she was lying across the backseat of a car.

She was getting pretty good at knowing where she was without even opening her eyes. Although, since Gregori and Tamara had handed her on to these guys, she hadn’t been blindfolded. They had taken it off to photograph her and the flash had been so bright after all the days in the dark that she saw red suns in her eyelids for hours afterwards.

Anya couldn’t decide if it was a good or a bad thing that she was no longer blindfolded. She liked being able to open her eyes, but was it ominous that the men didn’t mind if she saw their faces?

Not that being able to see around her had told her much. She had a picaresque impression of dark, deserted streets, a man with a fat, square face, the car stopping, starting, doors slamming—had she been locked into the boot at some point? And voices outside the car speaking in Ukranian?

She couldn’t trust her muddled senses. All she could think about was hearing her father’s voice on the phone, the concern in it, imagine his strained face. All the feelings and tears she had frozen deep in her heart for the last few days had rushed up to the surface and exploded.

She wept. The pictures in her head broke her heart over and over again.

All she wanted was to see her family again. Nothing else mattered—not glamour, not fame, not even music. Only love could fight terror and cold and death. It was as simple as that, and it had taken this nightmare for her to understand. Worst of all, her hope—so carefully nurtured and sustained so far—was ebbing away like water down a plughole.

Anya had no idea where Gregori and Tamara were, nor who these new people were, or where they were taking her. But she had clung to the thought that whoever was holding her prisoner wanted money from her father. It followed that once the ransom call had been made, her father would give them the money and it would all be over. But now it seemed that the nightmare was only just beginning.

The thing that frightened her most—if it were really possible to pick one single thing—was the growing certainty that she was no longer in Russia. She had been taken out of the country and she despaired that she would ever be found.

Happily, Yudorov’s chalet was a stone’s throw from the Suvretta House Hotel and a room had been booked for Stevie there. Although the Suvretta was enormous—and rather fabulous in its own right—it was five minutes’ drive from the centre of town and less popular with the Euro flash/cash/trash set. They all preferred the more famous Palace Hotel in the centre of town, with its luxury boutiques and full-voltage visibility. While the guests at the Suvretta still came for the skiing, at the Palace, hair stylists, beauticians and shop assistants could hardly keep up with the demands of guests who were only interested in the après ski—preferably without the ‘ski’.

Yudorov had insisted that there was no room for any but his own security staff—and twenty guests—in the chalet itself. This was probably wise, Stevie thought. Yudorov’s own people would be highly professional and carefully vetted. There could be no guaranteeing his guests had been as careful. Allowing them to have their own armed guards in the chalet would have been a serious security risk. Stevie would have made the same recommendation if she had been Yudorov’s risk assessor.

For Stevie’s mission objectives, it was a good beginning.

The Hammer-Belles were to arrive the following day by helicopter from Zurich, in time for the grand final match. The big bash was that night, and celebrations were due to carry on all week. In the meantime, Stevie planned to scout around to see what she could pick up about the goings-on in town.

Gossip travelled faster than news—and was often more reliable—in a resort like St Moritz. She had organised to have dinner at Chesa Veglia with the manager of the Palace, who happened to be a dear friend.

If anyone knew who was in town, doing what, and with whom, it was Paul.

They had arranged to meet at the Palace around seven for a drink. Stevie had a bath and dressed for work. Although dinner with Paul was pleasure, you never knew what waited around the corner and her assignment had officially begun. She had to be able to run or climb at a moment’s notice, but also to blend in perfectly with the local scene.
The two thousand francs David had given her had gone on a pair of butter-soft leather trousers, black and cut to sit on the hip bone.

It was money she should probably have spent on something sensible like printer cartridges, and she was feeling a little guilty. Neither her Swiss nor her Scottish heritage allowed for such extravagant impulse buys. Still, the trousers made her legs look like liquorice sticks and she couldn’t bring herself to regret them. An oversized cashmere rollneck in charcoal went over thermals, then her old, fur-lined boots with unbeatable snow grip. Pearls. Rolex. Knife. Ready.

It was early but Stevie wanted time to wander about the lobby and the shops and re-familiarise herself with the layout. Sandy would most certainly want to visit the boutiques, Gucci, Bulgari, Hermes... all quiet, not much to see.

Once or twice she stopped suddenly in front of a boutique, looking casually over her shoulder; she kept an eye on the mirrors inside the shops—Stevie couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being followed. It had been with her since her meeting with Kirril Marijinsky at the Kronenhalle. Surely David Rice wasn’t still having her followed?

That would be absurd, and insulting. But if it wasn’t his men, who was it?

Probably no one. It was more than likely her still-shaken nerves from the shooting in Moscow.

She strolled on, past Swarovski, Dior, La Perla—the lingerie store was in an uproar. A gang of beautiful women were tearing the place apart.

Stevie walked in. She counted three, four, five rather stunning young women—no, wait, six, seven behind the bikini rack—filling their arms with lingerie. A huge pile already sat on the counter, a harried shop assistant doing her best to ring up the price tag on each exquisite, handmade undergarment. Her eyes shone feverishly. Doubtlessly she had never seen a day’s sales like it.

The girls spoke Russian, calling to each other, mostly not even bothering to try on the underwear but just adding it to the increasing mountain on the desk. They were all young, probably nineteen or twenty—pretty faces but not fashion models—with the killer bodies of dancers. They were not dressed for the snow: skin-tight jeans tucked into the tops of spike-heeled knee-high boots and tiny singlet tops, some wore micro-minis, even stilettos. For Stevie, standing there in the middle of the shop, small and in flat-soled boots, it felt a bit like being caught in a feeding frenzy of flamingos.

Minutes later, having literally stripped the racks bare, the girls gaily produced massive wads of cash. The shop assistant’s eyes opened even wider. They left a pile of notes as thick as a dictionary at the register and swept out like a laughing hurricane.

Stevie was quick to follow. She watched them rush into Dior, giggling. One girl almost tripped in her heels with eagerness. They didn’t have the faces or the clothes of little rich girls, and they were far too easy with the money for it to be their own hard-earned cash.

Rich boyfriends, thought Stevie, bankrolling a shopping spree before the party tomorrow night... Very rich, she added, as she saw several trying on some evening gowns which cost well into the several thousands. She wondered who all these girls had come with.

Paul will know, she thought, and headed for the lobby.

‘They all arrived last night,’ said Paul, pressing the tips of his perfectly manicured fingers together. ‘The assistant manager was a little suspicious at first. The girls didn’t seem to know where they were—they hadn’t brought any luggage and they were dressed in very skimpy clothes, and no coats.’

The waiter brought a bottle of Roederer on ice. Paul opened it himself and poured two glasses. ‘It turns out they were guests of Alexander Nikolaievitch Yudorov. They said they were visiting some friends of his who have taken suites on the eighth floor.’ He arched an eyebrow.

‘They’re still visiting.’

Paul raised his glass. ‘It’s good to see you, Stevie.’

She smiled warmly at him. ‘It’s good to see you, Paul.’

Paul was one of the few gentle men she knew, soft-spoken, always perfectly groomed, not a hair out of place and smelling of Hermes orange blossom water. He was a very kind man and extremely good at his job.

‘The guests the girls are visiting are three gentlemen from Russia.’

His voice was smooth and low, impossible for anyone to overhear. ‘They were down earlier this afternoon in the
shopping arcade. They bought watches and diamonds—all paid in cash. The shop had never seen anything like it, and they make a lot of sales. This is St Moritz.’

‘What are the staff saying?’

Paul leaned in discreetly. ‘The boutique owners love them; everyone else hates them. It is as you would imagine: rude in restaurants, rude to the maids, throwing money about . . . vulgar.’ He whispered the last word. Stevie kept her smile to herself—vulgarity was the worst offence in Paul’s well-bred eyes.

‘In any case,’ he sat back and neatly crossed his legs, ‘the Swiss authorities are keeping an eye on the situation but there is nothing illegal about all the girls in the suites, nor spending money. But I prefer to have them watched—for the safety and wellbeing of my other guests mainly.’

Stevie and Paul finished their aperitif and walked out into the night. The sky was heavy with cloud as they made their way through the old town. Chesa Veglia was an old farmhouse with simple food and a converted hayloft from where diners could watch the goings-on at the longer tables below.

Paul sighed as they were shown to their small table in the loft.

‘The Chesa will be ruined soon. Word has got around that Princess Caroline dined here twice last week and now the hordes all want to come. I’ve had fifteen requests for reservations today from people who would usually shun the pizza oven and bare wood walls of this place.

Ah, les temps changent.’

Stevie took his hand and smiled at him. ‘Don’t worry, Paul. It’s not forever. Your Russians are just the latest wave of wealth to hit Swiss shores. Don’t you remember the Arab boom? The Japanese? You said the same thing to me each time then. It’s people who change, not places. If everyone preserves what they hold dear, it won’t disappear.’

Paul shook his head mournfully. ‘Stevie, I think you underestimate the power of money to corrupt. These people come from a country where it is possible to buy everything—furs, diamonds, gold, guns, people, babies, the police. Nothing is priceless. They are exporting these values. That idea frightens me.’

They chose wood-fired pizzas from the menu and a bottle of Nebbiolo from Peimonte.

The restaurant was packed and Paul scanned it inconspicuously, pointing out to Stevie the faces he knew: ‘That’s the captain of the Blue Bulls polo team with his players. The large man at the end is the patron, he’s from Zurich, his wife is the tiny blonde in white jeans . . . The couple in motorcycle leathers are from Hamburg—he is in biotech, regulars at the Palace . . . That table is mostly Australians, very rich, all here for the polo and a bit of skiing . . .’

‘What about those two women over there,’ Stevie raised her chin in their direction. ‘The well-groomed women with the diamonds and the designer jeans . . .’

‘Where?’

‘Sitting by the entrance, late twenties, early thirties, perfect hair— one’s blonde the other dark.’

Paul darted a quick glance in the direction Stevie had indicated.

‘Oh yes. Their names are Tara and Tatiana—I’m not sure which is which.

They come together every year: Swiss finishing school, jobs in London, up here husband-hunting every season. There are a few like them. They move their activities to the Riviera in summer.’

‘Is it that hard for them to “capture” these husbands?’ Stevie asked, amused. ‘They’re very attractive women . . . but I suppose love can elude anyone.’

‘They’re after a mega-rich husband, Stevie. They won’t look at anyone else.’

The waiter brought the wine. Paul waited until he left the table

before continuing. ‘Those girls want to be treated like princesses—literally to have everything done for them and be showered with expensive gifts and be flown around the world on a private jet. But the trouble is, the decent fellows can sense it and stay away. Those men are not flash enough for these girls anyway. The playboys and oligarchs who are like that, well, they want the eighteen-year-old supermodel from Vladivostok who looks stunning and is kept happy with furs and handbags.’ He took a small sip of his wine. ‘Why would those men want a demanding woman who is clearly after marriage, and whom they would see as past her use-by date anyway?’

‘That’s a rather awful way to put it, Paul.’

‘Perhaps I seem a bit harsh, but I see the girls ever year at the hotel. I see how they behave towards anyone who isn’t “someone” to them. Those women are the architects of their own unhappiness. I find it hard to feel sorry for them.’
‘I’m sure you’re right, Paul, but in my experience matters of the heart are usually very complicated.’

Stevie here was thinking acutely of her own confusion over men—Joss. Paul knew the whole story but was too tactful to bring it up directly.

Paul took another careful sip of his wine and looked at Stevie.

‘Oh, I would agree with you on matters of the heart, but we are talking about matters of the wallet. Those are rarely complicated.’

Stevie studied the women for a moment, noticed how their eyes darted to the door every time a new face walked in, the way they watched the room and not each other as they spoke. Paul was right.

‘So,’ Paul pressed his fingertips together, as was his habit. ‘What business brings you to St Moritz?’

Stevie hesitated. Paul was an invaluable ally but she felt uncertain about disclosing the name of her clients, even to him. It wasn’t very professional.

Paul smiled. ‘I’ll tell you what, I’ll guess and we can talk hypothetically. That would be alright, wouldn’t it?’

Stevie nodded, relieved.

‘So, my guess would be you are here to look after Douglas Hammer and Sandy Belle, who are undoubtedly coming in for the polo and Yudorov’s party. I make this guess based on an article that was front page in our local village magazine last week that proudly announced these same facts.’

‘If you were right, Paul, I’d have to be on the look-out for all sorts of troublemakers, wouldn’t you say? After all that publicity?’

Paul agreed. ‘Certainly anything that couple does makes a splash—especially in a small resort—and there are always people out to try to hitch a ride on someone else’s fame.’

‘Moths to the flame of fame.’ Stevie smiled. ‘That’s true. Perhaps there’s more truth to the description “cult of celebrity” than we realise.

They have a lot of followers.’

‘How can I help?’

Stevie thought once more about what a kind man Paul was. ‘Keep your eyes and ears open at the hotel, Paul. Even rumours can be useful, unusual arrivals or behaviour, and especially people who ask lots of questions about specific individuals. I’d be interested in hearing about them.’

Paul turned the stem of his wine glass with delicate fingers. He seemed to be on the verge of telling Stevie something, his mouth opened then closed, his eyes left hers and sought the bread basket.

‘What is it, Paul?’

‘Oh, nothing. I had something to tell you but it completely slipped my mind . . . old age I suppose!’ He laughed.

Stevie shook her head. ‘Silly creature.’ Paul was not yet forty.

Stevie slipped her key into the lock of her hotel-room door. She felt suddenly very tired and longed for the goose-down pillows and duvet that waited for her inside.

As she walked through the door, she sniffed the air. It was a habit she had. You could always tell what had been going on in a room by its smell, even if there was no physical evidence. So she sniffed automatically, and stopped. Sniffed again.

There was the distinct smell of cigarettes. Not of cigarette smoke, which could have wafted up from somewhere, but of nicotine. It was the scent of a heavy smoker. It was a hotel, maids came and went, it could easily have been one of them . . . but there was the tang of alcohol mixed with it, stale alcohol. Maids didn’t smell like that.

Was someone in the room?

Adrenaline pumped in and woke her right up. She could see the whole room from the door. It was empty.

She peered through the crack between the hinges holding the door to the wall. No one behind the door.

The bathroom door was open. She inched forward so that she could see the whole bathroom reflected in the large mirror.

Empty.

The base of the bed reached the floor. No one could fit under there.

The closet.

If anyone was in the room, the closet was the only place they could be. Stevie bent carefully and slipped her knife
out of the special sheath on the inside of her boot. Its balanced weight in her hand gave her confidence.

A maid passed by her open door and Stevie called out to her.

‘Excuse me, signorina. Would you do me a great favour and hang my coat in the closet? It weighs a tonne and I sprained my wrist on the ice earlier today.’ She spoke clearly, making sure her voice could be heard by anyone hiding in the room.

‘But of course.’ The young woman dutifully took Stevie’s coat from her. She headed for the closet, Stevie at her heels, the knife pointed and ready to be rammed, if necessary, into the shoulder of anyone hiding there.

The maid flung the door back and hung the coat in the empty closet. She turned. ‘Is there anything else, signora?’

Stevie quickly hid the knife behind her back. ‘No, thank you. Very helpful.’ She gave the girl a five-franc coin and closed the front door behind her.

She was still certain someone had been in her room. The smell was all wrong. A burglar? It was unlikely—this was Switzerland. But you never knew . . .

Stevie moved to her underwear drawer. She arranged her panties, bras and socks in a specific pattern every time she unpacked. To the casual observer it wouldn’t be noticeable, but she would immediately be able to tell if anyone had moved a thing. She opened her drawer.

The pattern had been disturbed. Someone had searched it. She felt an icy shiver of fear.

Could still be a curious maid, her reason reminded her, but she didn’t believe it. Like a cautious robot she drifted to the bathroom.

The maid had done her room before she left for dinner. The bed was already turned down, the slippers in their place on the floor . . .

But her nécessaire had definitely been touched. It had moved from the perfect position she had placed it in, carefully nestled under the shelf.

It was slightly askew. Someone had searched her room and didn’t want her to know it. Who?

She poured herself a whisky from the minibar, added a splash of water and sat back on the bed. The most likely answer was still a maid or maintenance worker—faulty light bulb or some such requiring attention. She rang down to housekeeping and was assured no one had been in and no maintenance work had been ordered.

She put the phone down and sipped her drink.

Could David Rice still have her under surveillance? It was possible, but would his men do a room search if they were just keeping an eye on her safety? Could it be someone who had seen her with the Kozkovs in Moscow? But whatever for? She was no longer involved. Her ineffectiveness in resolving the matter would surely protect her from interest.

That left Yudorov’s security detail. His people would have had the skills to enter the room unnoticed, search invisibly (almost), and they had a motive. They might feel they needed to find out more about the Hammer-Belles’ ‘security overseer’ for their own protection: Was she who she claimed to be? Was she armed? Did she have any links to Yudorov’s enemies?

Stevie felt a rush of anger and quickly shook it off. No point.

Anger restricted consciousness and clouded thinking. As intrusive and rude as it was, Yudorov had to be cautious. He had a lot of enemies.

Enormously rich Russians invariably did. Anyway, his spies wouldn’t have found much of interest.

She had taken her knife with her. One passport was with the front desk, the other in her pocket. Her underwear, well perhaps that might have been of some interest . . . She smiled at the thought of thugs sniffing about her panty drawer, looking for dangerous secrets and contraband weapons.

Let them look to their heart’s content. There was nothing to find.

She checked that the front door was locked, jammed a chair under the handle for extra peace of mind and fell into a deep sleep.

The phone rang at ten minutes past one, startling Stevie out of a dream about elves on a beach.

‘Hello?’ she croaked into the receiver.

‘Stevie, it’s Paul. I’m sorry to wake you, but I thought you might want to know sooner rather than later.’

‘Know what, Paul?’ Stevie was trying to shake the sleep from her mind.
‘Well, at dinner you asked me to tell you if anyone asked questions about specific individuals?’
Stevie was suddenly wide awake. ‘Yes?’
‘Well, I was talking to one of my receptionists, Evi, who has just finished her shift. I mentioned that she should keep a lookout for anyone making detailed inquiries about our guests or other high-profile personalities in town—nothing serious, just passing the word around.’
‘Good thinking, Paul, but who was asking?’
‘One of the Russians who is staying in the suites on the eighth floor, name of Sergei Lazarev.’
‘The ones with all the girls?’
‘Exactly. Evi speaks some Russian and Mr Lazarev approached her and handed her two hundred francs. Apparently he wanted to know if the Hammer-Belles were going to be at the polo. He said he was a big fan of theirs. Evi refused the money of course and told him she was, unfortunately, unaware of the names of the invitees.’
Stevie felt a rush of adrenaline.
‘Please, Paul, can you scan Lazarev’s passport photo and send it to me?’
‘I’ll do it now.’

Stevie re-examined Lazarev’s portrait over breakfast, committing the face to memory: rectangular with pale, pitted skin; short dark hair.

Nothing remarkable, except that the ears had unusually large and fleshy lobes.
Stevie had sent the picture to Josie last night with instructions to find out what she could. Whoever this man was, he wouldn’t get near the couple, Owen Dovetail would make certain of that.

Stevie poured a cup of scalding black coffee and dipped a slither of burnt toast into her boiled egg. She hoped she would find the time to catch up on a little sleep before Yudorov’s party that night. It would not be the sort of affair that finished before dawn and she would have to be alert.

The polo match, the grand final of the Cartier Polo World Cup on Snow, was to take place on the frozen surface of Lake St Moritz, at the foot of the village.

Tents for the horses and spectator marquees were already humming with organisers, grooms, sponsors and security. The excitement, always high during the four-day tournament, was at its most feverish.

The day was grey and icy but completely still. Stevie had dressed in her leather trousers and she was grateful for their warmth.

The spectators began to arrive, some in their own cars, the more important ones in chauffeured Maybach limousines. Standing by the field, Stevie pulled out her mini-binoculars—always useful for impromptu safaris, or the opera—and scanned the faces. Growing cold, she decided to walk the venue, glad for the chance to get her bearings before the crowds arrived.

There was only one exit for vehicles and that was manned by the Kantonspolizei. The venue was open but largely inaccessible due to the vast frozen lake it sat on. Any approach was very clearly visible and would draw attention.

If anything were being planned, she guessed it would happen in amongst the crowds. This would prevent the police or security from firing a gun or getting a clear view. The most dangerous time was during arrival and departure, when arrangements were in flux.

As the couple was arriving by helicopter, straight onto the grounds, Stevie guessed it was more likely that an attempt would be made on departure. She would make sure Dovetail had confirmed independent transport to Yudorov’s chalet. The chauffeured limousines were a security risk.

Stevie stood and watched for a moment as the polo ponies in their heavy blankets were led around by grooms in thick jackets, hats and scarves. It must feel fantastic to gallop through the snow, she thought, a bit like riding in the soft sand.

At ten past ten the heavy thudding of rotor blades up the valley announced the arrival of the Hammer-Belles. The helicopter hovered over the car park, the downdraft creating a blizzard of snow and freezing air that blasted the waiting press that had gathered like flies behind the security cordon. Stevie shielded her eyes.

Out jumped Owen Dovetail. Stevie was extremely glad to see him. Nothing bad could happen when the sturdy Welshman was on the case. He was highly competent, utterly dedicated and she trusted him with her life.
A second man leapt out. He was quite stocky—in fact—wearing wraparound sunglasses and head-to-toe camouflage. He looked like an action-man figurine. Stevie assumed this was the Hammer-Belles’ own man. He held up his hand to help Sandy out of the cabin.

The starlet emerged in a starburst of flashbulbs. She was dressed from head to toe in honey colour, from her spike-heeled knee-high boots, to her suede trousers to her swathes of cashmere, her honey-tinted lenses, her honey-coloured tan, even her hair had been dyed a honey shade of blonde. The effect was quite striking.

She waved to the gathered crowds and stepped slowly down from the helicopter, the blades having been stopped in deference to her expensive coiffure. She stopped and stood waving at the crowds, the photographers. Dovetail stalked the crowds with his eyes, the only pair not looking at Sandy in that moment.

Douglas Hammer came up and stood beside her. He, too, was glowing with good looks, his skin the same honey colour as Sandy’s, his hair a little blonder, dressed in a long camel overcoat, a chocolate scarf and mirrored sunglasses.

After him alighted the manny, the male nanny Stevie remembered from her first meeting with the couple. He was carrying a large honey-coloured bag lined in fur. Had they left Kennedy-Jack at home? Then why was the manny with them?

Stevie showed the action man the marquee where the Hammer-Belles were to be hosted and he set about opening a corridor in the crowd for his charges to walk through. Although the spectators turned to look, no one mobbed the Hammer-Belles, no one approached them, most turned then went back to the cars or horses moving about the grounds.

So far the security situation appeared to be pretty straightforward.

Stevie approached the manny.

‘Where is—’ she began, but stopped abruptly when she heard a tiny sneeze, an unmistakable baby sneeze. Then another. They were coming from the fur bag. Stevie looked closely and saw it was a baby carrier of some kind and deep inside it, almost hidden in all the fur, was the Hammer-Belle baby. That made three.

Yudorov’s marquee took polo spectatorship to a new level. Stevie had never seen anything quite like it. It was the biggest of all the marquees and would have comfortably held three hundred guests. At one end, there was a huge bar carved entirely out of ice. Dotted about in that ice

were stems of orchids, in all strange and gorgeous shapes, and different colours. Shot glasses made of ice were filled with vodka, slammed down the throat and crushed underfoot, where, on the warm red carpet, they melted to nothing. A huge bowl of caviar stood at one end of the bar, also carved out of ice, a silver ladle for serving.

From the tented roof hung six chandeliers, their crystal baubles suspended above the guests like icicles. At the other end of the tent was the most enormous harp Stevie had ever seen, and on a stool beside it, the tiniest harp player, her long dark hair threaded into a plait that reached past her waist.

Trays of food were being handed around—crabs claws, sushi, steamed dumplings on spoons—the variety seemed endless. All the waiters, Stevie realised with a start, were dwarves dressed in traditional Swiss costume: embroidered shirts in red and blue, matching embroidered skull caps and black velvet knickerbockers. They made the whole scene seem faintly surreal.

Where was Yudorov? He would want to greet his famous guests.

Stevie looked for the thickest clump of security men . . . There. The host himself was wearing a rust-coloured fur jacket and sharply pointed python-skin cowboy boots in the same colour. He was hatless and smoking a cigar, giving Stevie a clear view of his round face, topped with fine gingery hair, and his piercing blue eyes, also perfectly round. His wife, Amalia, was by his side, a tiny woman with perfect black hair in a huge, black fur bomber jacket from under which poked tiny, denim-clad twigs. She looked—and her sharp face only added to the impression—rather like an exotic breed of chicken.

Stevie knew from Josie’s notes that Amalia rarely left London, while Yudorov was constantly travelling. Everyone knew, presumably including the wife, that he had girlfriends galore and none of them over twenty-two. He caught sight of the Hammer-Belles. Sandy gave a little wave.

‘Yoo—hoo,’ she cooed as he made his way over to them and kissed Sandy’s hand.

‘Welcome to my tent!’ He clapped Douglas on the back and ushered them over to where he had been standing. The match was about to begin.
The side of the marquee was rolled up so guests could actually watch the match, although many seemed totally uninterested.

The captain of Yudorov’s team—renamed the Blue Bears—had a ten-goal handicap, the team a twenty-goal handicap between them.

Yudorov would, Stevie thought, be feeling confident of winning against the red team, led by rogue Australian Jack ‘Ruki’ Baillieu with his eight-goal handicap. Stevie had, however, seen Ruki play enough times to know he was a wild card that could turn the game in an instant.

The first chukka started and the horses raced around the field at unbelievable speed, especially given that they were galloping on snow and ice. Stevie had seen the grooms shoeing them earlier—huge iron shoes with metal spikes to give the horses grip.

The ball was large and fiery orange, easy to see in the snow, but the oddest thing was the silence. The thud of hooves was muted to almost nothing, even the thwacking mallets, the cries, were distant and muffled. The red and blue jerseys of the players stood out brightly against the grey day and the air in the valley was as still as a crypt.

Sandy and Douglas watched with some interest for a few minutes then Sandy’s eyes began to wander over the other guests. There were some rich pickings: Prince Albert of Monaco was there with two black girls, both beautiful; the youngest of the Agnelli family—fresh from rehab in Arizona—and his sister were by the bar; the captain of the English football team was talking to his hairdresser—or at least Stevie thought it was his hairdresser—yes, there, the man was tousling up the captain’s fringe: hairdresser.

Nadia Swarovski was there with her lover—a different one to the one who was kidnapped the year before. She had obviously moved on.

There was Arik Joel over by the harp, head of the biggest movie studio in the world. Sandy hadn’t spotted him yet . . . and Melanie Fourguet-Thomas, the much-married cosmetics queen from Belgium feeding her three Shihtzus (dressed in matching sheepskin coats) yellowfin tuna sashimi from ceramic spoons. There was a sheikh in his Saudi robes surrounded by young men in dark suits and eyebrows, and the Crown Prince and Princess of Greece were mingling with all five of their children.

Stevie felt him before she even saw him. She recognised the faded jacket in the middle of the finery: the frayed collar, the dark, curling hair. Panic and horror and a terrible thrill hit her—all mixed together—in a blast. It was amazing what the sight of the back of a head could do.

She felt suddenly sick.

There was a tug at her sleeve. A dwarf was offering her a glass of schnapps, painted with Yudorov’s face. She downed it in two large but discreet sips and felt a little better. Her hands, she noticed with much dismay, were trembling.

She prayed he did not notice her . . . he seemed absorbed in passionate conversation with Marvin Blackwaller, head of a media conglomerate. Stevie slipped further behind Sandy and removed her eyes from his back.

The harp player was wonderful.

‘Hello you,’ said the voice.

Stevie had to look up. Joss Carey was standing in front of her, smiling.

The unmistakable smell of him hit her—the linseed oil, the turpentine, old leather—and she felt her heart knock itself against her ribcage, as if wanting to commit suicide.

Don’t be ridiculous, Stevie. Handle this.

The accepted thing was to return the smile, to greet him, to ignore the cruel things that had been said, done, as if it had all happened to another girl in another lifetime.

‘How lovely . . . ’ Stevie replied vaguely, her smile watery. Still on autopilot, she kissed him on both cheeks.

The accepted thing was to show that he had meant nothing to her, just as she had meant nothing to him.

But that was a lie. How could she be indifferent?

‘I didn’t know you were a friend of Yudorov’s,’ she continued.

‘I’m here with Charlie.’

Stevie stared into her ex-lover’s face. He seemed so sure she would be happy to see him; his eyes were so guilt-free. Was this, too, an act?

She didn’t think so.
‘Oh. Well, say hello to him for me.’ She smiled again, but what she really wanted to do was stab Joss with an ice pick.

Fortunately, Sandy’s eyes suddenly seized upon HRH the Crown Princess of Greece, Marie-Chantal. ‘Oh,’ she beamed at Stevie, who was standing at her elbow. ‘I simply must say hello to the Princess of Greece.’ She headed off, then turned back. ‘Wait! Where’s KJ—give me KJ!’

The manny pulled the sleeping baby from the fur bag and handed him over to his mother.

‘She’s just going to love him—look at the cheeks!’ squealed Sandy.

‘How could you not!’

Sandy resumed her course for the princess, the minder close at her heels. She waved him away. ‘Marie-Chantal doesn’t have her bodyguards, I won’t have mine. It’s not like I’m going far!’

Stevie left all thoughts of Joss and sought Dovetail’s eye. He was watching Sandy very carefully but stayed put.

Stevie headed off cautiously, using her small size to her advantage in a room full of enormous sunglasses, huge coats and big egos.

She heard Sandy exclaiming, ‘Oh isn’t it just the most rewarding thing you can do, Marie-Chantal, be a mother? I just love it! And you have five—how fortunate!’ Sandy was all honey-coloured wattage. ‘I simply can’t wait to get pregnant again!’

It was amazing to watch Sandy shed skins, thought Stevie. Maybe that was what made a good actor, inconsistence of personality and an intuitive sense of character—the ability to completely leave yourself behind. In two minutes, Sandy had become a glowing mother, basking in the inner satisfaction of staying at home to raise her child. It was, of course, an imaginary Sandy she was playing, but it was beautifully and convincingly done.

One of the few paparazzi who had been allowed into the tent stepped over and politely asked if he could photograph the two mothers with their children. Sandy blushed—she actually blushed—and reluctantly agreed. The two women stood with their heads together and showed their perfect teeth.

Stevie stood to one side and scanned the faces on either side of the paparazzo, as she had seen Dovetail do hundreds of times: mildly interested spectators, another photographer coming in for a photo of her own. As a risk assessor, these situations made her nervous. Too many variables.

Sandy was holding KJ up to the photographer. Everything seemed to be fine—and then something caught Stevie’s eye. It was a quarter profile, a long jaw, a large, fleshy ear lobe.

A quick stab of fear she couldn’t place. A warning. And then she saw the whole face, watching. It was Sergei Lazarev.

He was dressed in an Austrian Loden and a grey mountaineer’s hat, complete with feathers, that looked out of place with his very Eastern European features. His hand rested on a wooden walking stick, common among the Wanderer—Swiss hiker—set. It was decorated with the numerous metal souvenir badges that mountain walkers are so fond of. He was staring at Sandy.

What was he up to? Stevie moved closer to Sandy and saw Lazarev do the same.

Dovetail’s view was momentarily blocked by the Princess’s head.

Instinctively, Stevie stepped up right next to Sandy. Lazarev disappeared behind the photographer for a moment—where the devil was the man?—then suddenly he appeared, pushing violently past, knocking the photographer to the floor.

Quick as the bird she was, Stevie leapt in front of Sandy and KJ, shoving them behind her with one arm. The man hurtled forward, knocking into Stevie like a drunk.

Her mind raced, screaming instructions at her: *Tie him up, hold him any way you can, Dovetail will only be a second.*

Her body was racing with adrenaline.

Too late Stevie noticed the tiny red button below the handle of the walking stick, the finger poised to press it. The walking stick was pointing right at them—at Sandy and KJ.

Stevie dived at the man, her hands reaching to grab the stick. Her weight wasn’t enough to knock him to the floor but he spun and stumbled. The walking stick fired off with a harmless ‘pop’, into Lazarev’s own calf.

He lashed at Stevie with his stick, catching her on the side of the head. She reeled to the floor, more from the shock than the force of the blow. It stung like hornets.
Dovetail was on them then, covering KJ and Sandy with his bulk. ‘Get them out of here FAST!’ Stevie shouted. ‘There could be others.’ She scrambled up from the floor, furious. Where was Lazarev?

She could see the hat bobbing, pushing through the guests, making for the open side of the tent. Without thinking, she high-tailed after him.

He didn’t appear to be injured; he bolted. Stevie was just able to keep him in sight but she was not a fast runner and she would lose him at this rate.

Lazarev vaulted the low barrier that surrounded the polo field—the game was at half-time—and began to sprint along it. Empty of obstacles, he gained ground, fast approaching the exit gates and presumably a waiting car that would speed him away over the border.

That would not do.

A groom was passing with a hot pony, still saddled from the last chukka. In a moment of pure instinct Stevie grabbed the reins from the startled gaucho and was up on the pony. She wheeled the horse around and gave chase. Cheeks blazing with outrage and the effort of running in leather trousers, she galloped at full speed along the fence, throwing up great icy clods into the crowd.

The jaded spectators turned to watch. This wasn’t on the programme—and Stevie’s leather did look rather sexy up on the foaming beast . . .

She made ground fast. Keeping close to the fence she penned Lazarev in. She knew that if she could run him along the fence she would have a better chance of keeping him on track. She wanted to force him up the Kantonspolizei booth that stood at the exit. If she could get him arrested, perhaps he could be held long enough to foil any back-up plan the kidnappers might have.

The ground flew under her and she was catching him. She was going too fast and her head ached—but her blood was boiling and all caution had been trashed.

The man had almost reached the parking lot. She saw the orange lights of a Subaru WRX flash twice. Lazarev’s getaway car.

Faster.

She was almost on top of him. She shouted to the police. They ran towards her, not sure who was the victim in the scene that was unfolding at high speed before them, the middle-aged man in the Loden or the young Bodicea, all flaming cheeks and wild hair, hunting him down on the back of a galloping horse. A radio message crackled from security in the tent. Now they understood.

Lazarev was trying to zigzag, but Stevie’s horse had been trained to do just that for polo and she kept on him, only metres away now.

Then Lazarev caught his foot on a bank of snow and went down, skidding across the hard white floor, rolling twice. Stevie pulled up the horse and half slid, half fell to the ground.

The police advanced on Lazarev, their handcuffs open to receive him.

Although shaken by the encounter, Sandy proved surprisingly resilient. She refused to miss Yudorov’s party that night and seemed to relish the extra attention her brush with disaster drew to her.

‘It only makes the champagne taste sweeter, darling!’ Stevie heard her exclaim several times with a laugh.

Kennedy-Jack remained oblivious that anything had happened and was now happily sleeping with the manny and the minder on guard in his room. Douglas was beaming with protective strength and pride.

The fears of the Hammer-Belles, after all, had been justified. The famous couple was indeed a target of much desirability all over the globe, but they would not let their prominence become a burden for themselves or their host. Beam, smile, beam.

As for Stevie, the whack she had received to her head throbbed painfully and she was still shaking from the adrenaline surge. It wasn’t enough to keep her from her job, although Dovetail had made her promise she would stay firmly in the background, no matter what.

A waiter passed by with a tray of champagne glasses—Cristal, the infallible favourite of rap stars and oligarchs—that had been sprinkled with large flakes of gold leaf. Stevie took a generous gulp of champagne, swallowing a large flake of gold in the process. She was sure someone had told her gold was good for the digestion . . .

The party in Yudorov’s chalet was in full swing even before the helicopters ferrying the host and a slew of guests
touched down in the snow outside. The car park was full—Maybachs, Bentleys, two Rolls Royce Phantoms, and a Bugatti Veyron—the outside of the huge chalet lit up like a Christmas tree. Security forces were everywhere: in suits by the front doors, side doors, throughout the house; in black camouflage on the roof, the balconies, and sprinkled amongst the pine trees around the perimeter. These had attack dogs on short leashes and automatic weapons tucked under their arms. No chances were being taken.

Yudorov had been horrified at the attempt on Sandy and Kennedy-Jack and he’d seen the breach in security as a dereliction of his host’s duties, especially seeing as the aggressor had been an invited guest. This detail Sandy was not told, not by Yudorov, nor by Stevie.

Owen Dovetail had checked Kennedy-Jack’s sleeping arrangements and was now back watching the room with Sandy and Douglas.

He was moving on an irregular circuit that would allow him to keep an eye on both baby and parents. He didn’t have much faith in the action-man minder.

Stevie wandered from room to room, taking a look at the other guests, keeping an eye out for any signs that something was amiss.

She felt rather proud that she had foiled the afternoon’s attack on Sandy, but she knew it had partially been luck. The IRA had said it after their Brighton bomb failed to kill Margaret Thatcher: ‘You have to be lucky all the time. We only have to be lucky once.’ Once was enough.

The host had changed into something more casual (a Superman T-shirt) and he was sitting with four other men on a divan in the main room. His polo team had lost the match and the men were toasting him—it is Russian custom to toast a failure as well as a win—with shots of vodka. Stevie moved a step closer to listen. She knew she was safe; Russian men never paid attention to women they didn’t want to sleep with. They had moved on to anecdotes about Alexander ‘Sascha’ Nikolaievitch Yudorov.

‘Sascha is a man who has saved presidents, entire governments, and no one even knows it. Like that time in Africa, we were with Thabo Mbeki, and he is toasting Sascha, and he gets the toast the wrong way round and shouts “up bottoms!”’

They all roared with laughter.

‘I’ve known Sascha since he was a boy—I had just had my bar mitzvah, he was a few years older. He asked me to come and help him move some garbage bags—big black ones. He needed to bury them, he said. So we dug a large hole and dragged the bags over. They were so heavy. And then I’m sure I heard a groan from inside one of the bags. I was too scared to say anything. I just buried the bags.’

More laughter.

‘And then what about the sheikh in Dubai who presented you with that extraordinary watch—it would have been worth $100,000 at least!’

‘It was the most hideous thing I’d ever seen,’ Yudorov drawled, then lit a cigar.

‘Whatever happened to it? It went missing after dinner.’

Yudorov expelled a puff of smoke and smiled. ‘I gave it to the waiter on the way out.’

More laughter, more vodka, much smoking.

Yudorov’s wife was standing in a corner talking to the head caterer, her black hair falling like two perfect ink waterfalls on either side of her face. Had the face not been so terribly strained, it might have resembled Cleopatra’s.

Hers was the life that so many girls like Tara and Tatiana—the two having dinner at Chesa Veglia—wanted: married to a Russian oligarch of unbelievable wealth, private jets and homes around the world, diamonds everywhere and an army of people to take care of her. Amalia Yudorov was living their dream and she didn’t look like she was enjoying one minute of it.

She had paid a heavy price, thought Stevie, and if only those girls could see this. Would they notice? Would they see how taut, how pale, her face was? It looked like a mask and she was barely thirty years old.

How tight and controlled her movements, how brittle her spirit? Or would they just see the huge diamonds on her fingers?

Josie had included a lot of detail about Amalia’s life in her notes to Stevie: Amalia never knew where in the world her husband was, let alone what he was doing there or who he was with. She never knew if she would have to pack up and leave the next day to meet him wherever he was, nor where she would be going. Her job was to make sure all of his many houses around the world ran like clockwork, were luxuriously furnished, fully staffed, and organised for
his needs. The rest—well, there was no rest. Amalia had no life outside of Yudorov, and she had no life with him. She saw him for about six weeks a year in total and they slept in separate bedrooms.

Stevie watched Amalia greeting the guests as they came in: ‘Cristal, or Dom Perignon ’98? Crocodile sashimi or scrambled quail’s eggs with truffles?’ She was holding on to her tiny smile so hard it had become a grimace.

Stevie guessed Yudorov enjoyed playing mind games with his wife, keeping her close to the edge of a breakdown and completely constricted by his world. She looked like she hadn’t been held in years.

Stevie checked her phone again. The Kantonspolizei had promised to call with an update on their arrest that afternoon. Although Stevie knew the Swiss police to be utterly incorruptible, she hoped Lazarev had not somehow been released on a technicality, or managed to escape. So far, there had been no word.

She wondered what was taking Josie so long—she ought to have information on Lazarev by now.

**In with a burst of** freezing night air came seven beautiful girls. Discarding their furs and jackets in a careless heap, they revealed fabulous bodies in very little clothing. Stevie recognised the legs from the lingerie store at the Palace. And there was the baby who had almost tripped in her heels.

Stevie stepped out of sight as the two men accompanying them entered. She hadn’t forgotten that the third man from the eighth floor Palace suites was the one now under lock and key in the police cells. The men must have known each other, were possibly friends, even involved in the conspiracy. Unless they were just cover.

Dovetail appeared and Stevie signalled to him. ‘What are those men doing here? I thought we warned Yudorov about their possible connection to the assailant.’

‘We did,’ he replied. ‘It seems he didn’t disinvite them. They must be important to him—’ ‘—to risk the safety of someone as high profile as Sandy, I’d say.’

The Welshman scowled. ‘They won’t be losing so much as an eyelash without me noticing.’

The flock of girls were fawning over the two men, giggling loudly, not quite convincingly. Stevie couldn’t blame them—the men didn’t exactly look like anyone’s idea of a good time, with their stocky bodies, short limbs and the scars of heavy living—and worse—disfiguring faces that had never been handsome. They didn’t share even a hint of a smile between them.

The little group moved their gaiety into the next room, settling onto the large daybed and fur rug in the centre. With loud clicks of their stubby fingers, the men ordered the waiters to bring champagne and vodka. They seemed utterly uninterested in Sandy Belle. Dovetail slipped invisibly after them.

Stevie’s phone rang. It was Paul.

‘Stevie, I heard you got into a fight . . .’

Stevie suppressed a sudden giggle. ‘Yes, but it was all the other man’s fault, Paul. He started it.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No, no. I’m fine.’ Stevie was touched by the concern in his voice.

‘Purple bruise on the side of my face like a bunch of grapes, but more hurtful to my self-esteem than anything else.’

‘Well that’s sort of what I was ringing about . . .’ Paul paused awkwardly. ‘I meant to tell you the other night but you seemed so . . .

radian. I didn’t want to spoil it.’

‘What is it, Paul?’

‘Joss Carey is here in St Moritz. I saw him the day before you arrived. I just wanted to warn you so you would be prepared if you ran into him.’

‘Too late for that, Paul darling. He found me at the polo.’

‘It wasn’t him you chased, was it?’ Paul asked, horrified.

‘It should have been. No. But I hated myself, Paul. I was shaking and—’ Stevie felt a hand on her shoulder. How much had he heard?

‘Anyway, Paul, I’m fine,’ she continued breezily, a little too loudly perhaps, but she was on the verge of panic.

‘Just a little whack and a bit of excitement—nothing a glass of bubbles won’t cure!’

Then she hung up on the bewildered Paul and turned to face Charlie.

‘I saw you today, chasing down that man.’ He stared at her as if seeing her for the first time. ‘Not bad in the
saddle—Joss always said you could ride.’
Stevie hoped to death that Joss had decided to stay home.
‘He’s here, you know.’ Charlie blinked at her myopically.
‘I’d rather not see—’ ‘Oh don’t worry about that Norah girl. She’s out of the picture,’ Charlie snorted. ‘Gave him
the boot. Still, he hasn’t done too badly off her fame. Quite the star himself now.’
And then Joss appeared. He was holding a bottle of champagne and two glasses. He gave Stevie a huge smile. ‘I
think the best man-hunter since Bodicea deserves a drink.’ He poured two glasses, handed one to Stevie, one to
Charlie. Then he raised the bottle and looked right at her. ‘I’ve never loved anyone but you, Stevie Margaret Duveen
...’

Stevie could hardly swallow her champagne. What was he saying?
How could he say that to her?

Charlie snorted again. ‘Bottoms up.’ He downed his glass in one.
‘Enough of this muck. Do you think the barman will do me a voddy pom pom?’ He wandered off in search of his
vodka and apple juice. Stevie was left alone with Joss.
‘... and I never will,’ he continued softly, his velvet eyes on her.
‘You’ve bewitched me.’
She was finding it impossible to pull away from his gaze. He still had the power to hypnotise her like a snake, and
there she sat, a little bird on a winter bough, watching him creep closer.
‘Stevie,’ he murmured, savouring her name like a caramel on his tongue. There were days when she would have
murdered to hear her name whispered in that voice.
But he is dangerous—don’t be a fool. Remember the heartbreak!
Shouting to herself was like yelling at a deaf man under water. Stevie was gone.

When Joss reached out and stroked her face, took her hand, she let him. Her treacherous heart beat like a wild
thing.
‘Stevie, come to the balcony with me. I want to talk to you.’
Every fibre in her body wanted to go with him. She stepped closer.
His eyes flicked up as someone passed. It was the youngest Russian girl, the unsteady fawn, hurrying off in the
direction of the bathroom. It was enough to wake Stevie from the hypnosis and concentrate her mind. She broke
away.
‘Excuse me.’
‘Stevie—please.’
Stevie turned and looked back at him. He was so handsome, so desirable, so awful. She didn’t trust herself to
reply.

Scooting in pursuit, she caught up with the girl in the corridor.
They both leaned against the wall, waiting for the bathroom to be free.
‘Hi,’ Stevie smiled. The girl glanced at her, but didn’t smile back.
She persisted. ‘My friend and I noticed you walk past. You are very beautiful. Are you a model?’

Stevie had uttered the magic words.
The girl turned, this time with a smile. ‘Yes. I want to be a super-model. I do some work in St Petersburg but now
I want to sign with an international agency and live in a foreign city, maybe Paris or New York.’

‘Do you have an agent?’
The girl made a face. ‘Not yet. It’s not so easy—there are so many Russian girls who want an agent.’
‘But they are not all as beautiful as you.’ Stevie became a honey-tongued seducer. What a reversal of roles, she
thought to herself. ‘We thought maybe those two men you were with were your agents ...’

The girl’s face darkened and she shook her head. ‘No. They are not good men.’
‘Why not?’
The girl scowled deeper and fumbled in her purse for a cigarette.
She lit it and blew smoke at the wall.
‘Look,’ Stevie leaned in a little. ‘Maybe I can help you. Tell me about those men . . . Who are they?’
The girl turned to Stevie and stared at her. Her eyes were huge in her small, heart-shaped face.
‘Fuck off.’ The bathroom door opened and she disappeared inside.

**House music was pumping throughout** the chalet. A Moroccan DJ had been flown in from Les Bains in Paris and was working the decks from an alcove by the bar. One or two girls were dancing, but moving to show off their bodies rather than enjoy the music. The two men were still on the settee, entangled with the other girls.

Suddenly there was gunfire—three shots in rapid succession—then an explosion of some kind. They had come from the front of the house.

Stevie ran to KJ’s room, taking the stairs two at a time, and almost crashed into the immovable bulk of one of Yudorov’s security men.

Everything was quiet up here. The baby was sleeping.

Then more shots—four this time, one after the other. Stevie rushed to the balcony. Was the chalet under attack? The terrace below was filled with guests, drawn out by the noise. Stevie could smell gunpowder, see only darkness.

Another explosion rocked the night.

A burst of beautiful gold stars rained down on the silent snowfields in front, lighting up the valley. The crowd cheered as red, green, blue and orange rockets whistled into the sky and shattered into fiery flowers. Yudorov’s grand display would be seen all the way down the valley.

‘Maybe I do need a holiday,’ Stevie muttered under her breath.

‘This is ridiculous.’

She allowed herself to relax for a moment, taking in the spectacle of the coloured sparks turning the snow green, and gold, and then an eerie blood red with every shower burst.

In the crowd below, she could make out Yudorov, Amalia standing stiffly next to him, Douglas Hammer and Sandy, chatting to Arik ‘movie god’ Joel, Dovetail’s reassuring bulk behind them, and there were Tara and Tatiana in furs and spiked heels and incredibly luscious hair. They were paying no attention to the fireworks but rather had their eyes on the gaggle of young Russian girls who were standing next to them, completely delighted by the light show. Tara and Tatiana were looking them up and down with an air of disdain that could be felt all the way to the upper balcony.

Stevie shook her head. Everything was a calculation to girls like those two. They couldn’t live in the moment, nor did it look like they had a great capacity for pleasure.

Tara or Tatiana glanced at Yudorov, stepped closer to him. Amalia noticed but kept her attention on the fireworks. Maybe nothing made any difference to her anymore.

Stevie went back inside as the last fiery flower faded over the Engadine Valley. Her fingers and nose were frozen and she was shivering with cold. As she made her way down the stairs, her path was blocked by Joss.

‘Steve,’ he cracked a beautiful smile. ‘I’ve missed you, girl.’

Stevie nervously tried to brush past. He had her by the arm, stopped her, kissed her on the mouth—that familiar warmth she hadn’t felt for so long. Her legs weakened.

‘Where’s Norah?’ She could hardly bring herself to say the name.

Joss led her into a room off the corridor. There was a large bed with a fur throw; a television lowered itself from the ceiling when he reached to dim the lights.

‘Norah never mattered, Stevie. There was only ever you.’

Joss reached out and stroked her cheek. Stevie couldn’t help it.

She closed her eyes.

‘I can’t stay.’ She would count to ten then tear herself away forever, she promised herself.

‘I’ve planted primroses all through my garden, Stevie, to remind me of you.’

Stevie’s eyes flew open. ‘You did the same thing for Norah—you gave her a primrose. I saw it on the bed.’

‘I did,’ Joss said carefully. ‘I admit it. This sounds stupid . . .’ He ran a hand nervously through his hair. ‘But you’d been away for weeks. I was missing you. I guess I was trying to recapture some of the magic you and I had, but it wasn’t the same with Norah. I need you.’

Words Stevie had longed to hear. The moment should have been the sweetest, but Stevie felt uneasy.
‘How am I supposed to trust you?’ She realised she was still whispering, hated herself for even answering him. ‘You don’t even have a garden.’

‘I know . . . I know, I’m so sorry,’ he cooed, his hand creeping up Stevie’s leg, the other undoing his shirt buttons. His eyes bored into hers and she felt herself falling back into the pillows.

The sound on the television was barely audible, but Stevie could tell the channel was a Russian one. Yudorov had installed satellite. Televised images of oilrigs in Baku blended in Stevie’s mind with Joss’s dark eyes, his full mouth as he kissed her, over and over again.

Joss slid her jumper over her head and cast it aside.

Would it be so dreadful to give in to him? Stevie half-wondered. Perhaps he had changed—people did—realised he truly loved her.

Could she really believe Joss wanted her back? That Norah had been a blip? A part of her wanted to believe so much . . . Her eyes searched the ceiling for answers and caught the television screen.

She sat up like a missile. Kozkov’s face was staring down at her—images of a black Mercedes in a car park with swarms of milizia—what was going on? Stevie leapt over the half-naked, bewildered Joss and grabbed the remote on the night table.

The Russian commentator’s voice became audible:

‘—police say Valery Nikolayevitch Kozkov was gunned down this evening after attending a local soccer match. The killers apparently at first mistook his driver for Kozkov and shot him twice in the head as he sat behind the wheel of his car. Realising their mistake, the assailants waited in the shadows for the real Kozkov to emerge, gunning him down as he reached his car. Five shots were fired, three to the head.’

Graphic images of a body lying on concrete, the upper half swimming in a pool of dark red blood.

‘It was well known that Kozkov never travelled with security guards.

Police are not commenting on who they suspect was behind the assassination but the pressure will undoubtedly be on them to catch the killers.’

The television showed a couple of milizia cordonning off the area, others standing around in the background looking lost. The reporter’s voice continued:

‘Kozkov was a fierce anti-corruption crusader and many speculate that his tough stance on money laundering may have been the provocation behind the killings—’ Stevie put her hand to her mouth. It was unbelievable. She had only just left him—a family man, a man full of ideals and energy and warmth. And now he had been gunned down like a tin rabbit at a country fair. It was all over and all the good he might have done for Russia would remain undone.

A horrible thought struck her.

Anya.

If Kozkov was dead, her kidnappers would have no use for her and Stevie feared terribly that they would not hesitate to kill her.

She jumped off the bed in a single bound and was out the door.

‘Stevie,’ Joss called to her. She turned back for a second.

‘Put some clothes on.’

In her shock, Stevie hadn’t realised she was still in her bra. He threw her jumper across the bed and she grabbed it, pulling it over her head as she ran.
The phone rang in Moscow but no one answered. The first and only thing she had thought of doing was calling Henning. Now, standing on the balcony, she wondered what needed to be done.

What could anyone do? What could she do? She was off the job, and in any case the client was dead, his daughter was still missing and would soon be dead. Run about as she might, she would achieve nothing.

The men who had assassinated Kozkov had used amateur goons to distance themselves from the killing. That explained why they had accidentally shot the driver first. Professionals would never have made that mistake. But the goons were deniable, the blame would be laid at the feet of a street gang, or Chechens.

Her thoughts turned to poor Irina, and to the pale and tortured Vadim whom she’d liked so much. What would this do to them? Were they, too, in danger?

She tried to call them, but again no one answered. Feeling helpless, Stevie went back inside.

Checking everything was in order with Dovetail and the Hammer-Belles, she strolled aimlessly from room to room, feeling in turns terrified for Anya, shocked for the death of her father, and a mass of confusion over what had happened up in the bedroom.

What should she do about Anya? She could be anywhere. And what about Joss Carey? Was she throwing away his genuine attempt to make up with her, her one chance at true love? People did make mistakes— she herself wasn’t perfect . . . but would she ever really be able to forget his betrayal? His timing was terrible and she couldn’t seem to find clarity in any direction.

Standing in a dark corner on the lower balcony, Stevie lit one of her black-and-gold cigarettes and stared out towards the woods, hoping to spot some of Yudorov’s security SWAT team on patrol. She tried to still her thoughts.

Suddenly the door behind her opened and the fawn came out, followed by Joss.

Stevie’s treacherous heart leapt. She stepped further back into the shadows and watched as Joss produced a bottle of champagne from under his jacket, and one glass from his pocket. As the cork popped— usually Stevie’s favourite sound—the fawn giggled. Stevie watched him reach into his shirt and produce a pale yellow rose. He handed it to her with all the gentleness in the world.

‘You know,’ he said in his caramel voice, ‘I find Russian women absolutely enchanting. I’d love to paint you.’

It seemed Joss had moved on to easier game. Stevie crunched her cigarette under her heel, lit another, then folded her arms in the dark.

The sulphurous flare of her match caught Joss’ attention. He turned and peered into the corner, seeing at first only the red glow of the burning tobacco tip.

‘Who’s there?’ he asked, his voice sharper now.

Stevie stepped forward and a shaft of light caught her face. She stared at him, saw the surprise on his face. Then he smiled at her, just as he had that day he’d walked in with Norah, and gave a small shrug.

It came to Stevie as she struggled to recover from the sucker-punch to the stomach: this was not the man for her. For all his pretences to truth and passion, this was a shallow man, an empty man. She had misjudged him, for the second time. Tonight, though, she realised that the magic she had seen in Joss had been a conjurer’s cheap trick, that gentleness in manner did not always mean kindness. It was time to move the hell on.

Stevie would have liked to take some spectacular, fiery revenge but she hadn’t the energy. In any case, it wasn’t worth the effort. Likely, Joss would turn it into a funny after-dinner story about the passions he unwittingly provoked in silly women. No, she would just drop him like an old sock from her life.

Passing by the two of them to go back inside was not an option. Stevie swung a leg over the balcony rail and let herself drop one storey down into the snowdrift below.

In hindsight, jumping had been a rather foolish—if silent—exit. She now found herself buried in snow to the waist. Still, she thought, she didn’t have far to flounder to the road. She lay back into the snow, now hidden from view, and rested for a moment. It was a pity there were no stars.

Stevie’s phone rang. It was Urs Willibitti from the Kantonspolizei with news: Sergei Lazarev had died in custody, despite having been only very slightly wounded in the right calf. This was, Willibitti explained, most unusual. They had never had a death in custody before.

After the arrest at the polo field, the police had taken the precaution of retrieving the offending weapon—the
walking stick. An examination revealed it had been modified by the insertion of a super-charged spring-loaded device designed to fire a projectile of some kind.

Sergei Lazarev’s leg wound had been treated by the station medic upon arrival. There was no trace of a projectile in the man’s leg. The wound appeared to be merely a puncture and was patched with disinfectant and a bandaid. It had been assumed, by Willibitti and others, that the device had failed in some way, simply misfiring into Lazarev’s calf and so sparing Sandy Belle and her child from harm.

The prisoner, however, had apparently grown quite agitated, shouting at the medic in Russian. No one could understand him so an interpreter was eventually sent for. By the time he arrived, the man was dead.

Urs Willibitti assured Stevie, in response to her questions, that the cause of death had been unnatural—could not be attributed, say, to the strain of her chase, nor to liver failure. Twenty minutes after the arrest was made, the man’s skin had turned blue. He had begun to have trouble breathing and seemed to have severe pain in his calf. Cause of death was respiratory arrest.

Urs Willibitti wished her a pleasant evening and promised to call back if new developments arose.

Stevie sat stunned in her snow cave, trying to fit the pieces together. Lazarev had turned blue and died in agony. It made no sense.

If Lazarev’s plan had been to kidnap Sandy, why would the walking stick have been intended to cause a horrible death? Wouldn’t a sedative have been more likely? If the target had been the child, surely the same applied? Neither the delayed demise of Sandy Belle, nor that of her son Kennedy-Jack, would achieve any objective that Stevie thought plausible: Lazarev was unknown to Sandy; their paths had, as far as anyone knew, never even crossed. A sophisticated, slow-release poison wasn’t the usual modus operandi of a deranged fan.

Something wasn’t right . . .

A text message arrived. Josie.

Sergei Lazarev: nothing known. Searched all, hence delay. Files most likely sanitised. Prob. ex-KGB if not active FSB or like.

And suddenly it became utterly clear.

From under the snow, she dialled David Rice in London. Her fingers were trembling.

‘Stevie Duveen.’ The way David said her name always made it sound like an affirmation that she existed. ‘I hear you saved the Hammer-Belle bacon up in St Moritz. Well done.’

‘David, they were never in any danger.’

‘It didn’t sound like that from Dovetail’s report: attempted kidnapping.’

‘The man wasn’t a kidnapper.’ Stevie tried to keep her voice calm. ‘He was an assassin—’

‘Why would the Romanians want to kill the Hammer-Belles?’ Rice asked, the pleasure gone from his voice.

‘He was Russian, name: Lazarev—ex-KGB.’ Stevie took a breath and let it out slowly. ‘He wasn’t after Sandy, he was after me.’

‘What?!’

Stevie heard his paces echoing on a marble floor—most likely the foyer in his club.

‘David, someone got Kozkov tonight—he’s dead. I think the same people are after me. My guess is they think I know something I don’t: the names of the members of the siloviki. Kozkov had compiled a secret list. He was going to use it to get Anya back. The attacker who was shot in the leg this afternoon died in custody. Sounds like poison—death by respiratory failure, blue-tinged skin—the venom of the Heloderma suspectum, or Gila monster, would match the symptoms. It makes sense.’

‘Hell,’ David cursed. ‘Stevie, get down from those mountains immediately. I want you in London and safely behind a desk.’

Stevie bit her lip. ‘I don’t think I can, David. I can’t stop thinking of Anya. How can I abandon her? With Kozkov dead—’ ‘I don’t care!’ Rice’s fury could be felt through the phone. ‘It is not your job. This is exactly why I didn’t want you getting mixed up in the Kozkov affair. You’ll get yourself killed, you stupid girl.’

Stevie’s boss paused; when he spoke again his voice was calmer. ‘Is that Henning with you?’ he demanded.

‘No, I think he’s in Moscow.’ Stevie suddenly missed her friend terribly. ‘It’s not his fault,’ she whispered.

‘It damn well is. I’m going to tear that man to pieces. There’s a chopper taking the Hammer-Belles to London tomorrow afternoon. You’ll be on it, Stevie.’
The line went dead. Stevie felt suddenly very alone. It was cold and dark in the snow. Exhaustion overwhelmed her and she fought back tears. She had to get out of the pit.

Practical concerns required she start digging some steps into the side of the snow hole with her boot. It took some effort and was a welcome distraction. Finally, she managed to drag herself free.

Muffled music was coming from the chalet behind her and the lights looked warm and inviting. Stevie’s eyes glanced over the balcony, but Joss and the girl had gone. She set off for the front door, allowing the prickling on her neck to turn to fear as she thought of Lazarev. It fitted with what Stevie knew of the mysterious siloviki and their fearsome reputation for getting things done.

An ex-KGB officer would also have access to unusual weaponry and poisons. And Stevie was now certain it had been Lazarev who had rifled through her room at the Suvretta House. It was also unlikely that he had been acting alone. Others would certainly come.

Stevie had narrowly escaped the horrific death that had been planned for her. Would she be as fortunate next time?

By tomorrow night, she would be in London. But would it be soon enough? And could she just give up on Anya? She had never heard David Rice so angry, but should she simply leave a young girl to die? Stevie felt torn between impossibilities.

Inside the chalet, the party was raging, with dancing girls perched on sofas and coffee tables. Stevie needed information. Where was the young fawn?

She caught sight of her by the DJ booth, dancing in hotpants, knee-high boots and a large cowboy hat, one eye firmly on Douglas Hammer across the room. Her top seemed to have been lost in the fray, along with Joss Carey.

Stevie advanced, refusing to be put off by beautiful undulating bodies, and blocked her into a corner.

‘I’ll make you a deal, my kitten,’ Stevie said to her in Russian. The girl tried to push past her but Stevie held firm.

‘I see you recognise Douglas Hammer. I can tell you, he is a friend of mine.’

The girl stopped struggling and started to listen.

‘I can also tell you that the man he is talking to is Arik Joel, the biggest movie producer in the world. I’m going to ask you some questions and if you answer them truthfully, I will introduce you to him and tell him he should put you in a movie.’

The girl’s eyes widened. Stevie’s instincts had been correct. This was not a girl who would scare easily—she had been threatened too many times in her young life for that—but she would respond to incentive.

Stevie played her final card. ‘Wouldn’t you like to go to Hollywood?’

The girl crumbled completely and Stevie pulled her into the butler’s pantry, away from curious eyes.

‘Who are the men you came with?’

‘We only know they are called Sascha and Yuri.’ The fawn’s eyes flickered nervously. ‘We don’t know their last names but they are very rich.’

Never mind, thought Stevie, she could get their names from Paul at the Palace.

‘So, how did you get to be here with them? Where did you meet them?’ she fired at the foul-mouthed fawn.

‘We are a gift from Yudorov.’

‘A gift?’ Stevie asked, unsure she had heard correctly.

The girl shrugged and lit a cigarette. ‘Some men talked to us in Moscow at a club and then said did we want to meet rich men and so we said yes and then they took us on a private plane and we arrived in this place. They took us to a big hotel and told Sascha and Yuri that we were a gift from Yudorov.’

‘You don’t even know where you are, do you?’

The girl blew a thick stream of smoke at the ceiling. ‘Does it matter?’

‘You’re in Switzerland,’ Stevie told her. ‘Just for the record. Now, there are three men staying in the suites on the eighth floor. Was the third man—Sergei Lazarev—a friend of the other two?’

The girl scowled—suspicion was at war with Stevie’s promise of stardom. Then her forehead cleared: the fantasy had prevailed. There was nothing more powerful than The Dream.

‘They didn’t speak,’ she said quietly. ‘Only one time I heard Yuri. Your man left and Yuri spat on the floor. I don’t think they were friends.’
Stevie shook her head. ‘Does that happen often—men come up to you and invite you to a party and you just go?’

The fawn made a face, rolled her eyes. ‘Men always invite us, promise things, offer money or a trip overseas to work as a model. It is the way it is at this club.’

It was all sounding familiar . . .

‘Wait a minute,’ Stevie put a hand on the girl’s arm, ‘Which club were you in, when the men came?’

‘Zima.’

The same club Anya and Petra had gone to the night before Anya disappeared. She was sure she still had . . . there it was. Stevie pulled the photo she had stolen from the nightclub wall from her back pocket. Pretty girls always remembered the faces of other pretty girls. She unfolded it and held it up for the fawn to see.

‘Recognise her?’

The girl barely glanced at it. ‘No.’

Stevie stepped in closer, her hand gripping the girl’s arm tightly. ‘Don’t mess with me, devochka. I am not in the mood. Look at her face. She is fifteen years old.’

Something in Stevie’s eyes must have changed the fawn’s mind. She shrugged. ‘She won the competition one week. I don’t even know her name. But I was at the club that night.’

Stevie relaxed her grip. ‘Who owns the club?’

The girl was getting impatient with Stevie’s questions. ‘Look, lady, I don’t know why you want to know all this. There’s nothing to tell. It’s simple. We want to find rich boyfriends and you have to go to parties like this to find them. The men buy us expensive presents, we dance for them, sometimes we sleep with them—it’s better than stripping in the clubs. Does it matter where we are, or who the men are? They’re all the same. They want sex and we want money.’

The girl eyed Stevie defiantly. She would have been all of eighteen.

‘And the other girls?’ pressed Stevie. ‘Do they feel the same way?’

‘We look out for each other a bit: word gets around who’s bad news, who the traffickers are . . .’ The girl exhaled a plume of smoke from the side of her mouth. ‘Some girls don’t even care about that they want to get out so bad.’

‘What do you mean “traffickers”?’ Stevie said quickly. ‘People traffickers?’

The girl stopped fidgeting and suddenly looked frightened. Had she said too much?

Stevie watched her face closely and decided to take a gamble: ‘Dragoman?’

The girl shook her head and squeezed her lips tight. Stevie wouldn’t get another word.

Out they popped from the butler’s pantry. Stevie led the now-quiet girl over to Douglas and Arik, introducing her as Olga Brolga because she realised she didn’t know the fawn’s name.

Douglas smiled politely, his eyes primly on her face, not her chest. He had, after all, cast himself as a family man and he took his role seriously. Arik, however, was quite taken with Olga Brolga.

‘Olga is an actress and a friend,’ Stevie beamed. ‘She’s been very helpful to me so be good to her. She’s not a toy.’ Then she left a very happy Olga to the grins of Arik Joel.

Dragoman. Stevie rolled the name around in her mind as she soaked in a hot bath. Her best thinking was usually done in the bath and, in any case, she was frozen to the bone. The right track was always clear and simple when you came across it. She hunted for it now.

Kozkov had made the existence of his secret list known. This made him too dangerous to keep alive, for the siloviki. Stevie doubted Dragoman would have as much to fear by being linked to Kremlin power players as they to him.

The order to assassinate him would have needed approval from the top. Kozkov was too important to be annihilated without it, something they had avoided doing up until now.

The siloviki must have assumed that Kozkov had shared that valuable information with Stevie, and now the shadows had come after her. What was another body to them? Better to be safe than sorry. The only reason they hadn’t just shot her dead was because they were in Switzerland, not Russia, and a point-blank assassination in this peaceful country would cause a massive stir.

A thought occurred: had Kirril given her away? It was a possibility. She would probably never know. It didn’t really matter. What did was that the assassins would certainly try again.
Stevie would not be safe until the siloviki decided she no longer mattered, or until they simply forgot about her. Trouble was, they had long memories and a wide reach. The mysterious deaths of prominent Russian émigrés who criticised various prominent politicians were evidence of that, no matter what the official line was.

But you couldn’t just go charging up against the red walls. Kozkov must have been on the right track or the siloviki—it had to have been them—wouldn’t have suddenly had him killed after all this time.

Cui bono? she asked herself. Who benefits from his murder? Not Dragoman. If he had wanted Kozkov dead, he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of holding Kozkov’s daughter hostage.

Stevie needed to find Anya. She was hoping that Dragoman would want to keep Kozkov’s daughter close, savour the satisfaction of his revenge. Holding Anya hostage was more than business to him: it was pleasure. And he would want to feel that every day.

Stevie also needed to get the wolves off her tail, but the trouble was, she didn’t know who the wolves were. And if she found them . . . well, she didn’t think she was the sort of girl who could kill a man.

She slid her head under the warm water and listened to the blood rushing in her ears. Then it came to her: Set a thief to catch a thief.

It was the only way.

She couldn’t unveil the identity of the siloviki. It would be close to impossible without seeing the list—wherever it was. Hunting for it would take more time and resources than she had, and it wouldn’t help get Anya back. But Felix Dragoman would have to know who the siloviki were. He would no doubt already be annoyed that they had killed Kozkov under his nose and possibly already suspicious of their motives. If he thought his friends in the Kremlin had turned on him, he would go after them himself. Stevie would never have to show her hand.

She lathered her hair with chamomile shampoo. Didi used to wash her hair with it when she was a child and Stevie still used it. How bad could things be when the world still smelled of chamomile?

Once Dragoman started hunting them down, the siloviki would be certain to retaliate in kind. There was a good chance they would kill each other . . .

It wasn’t the most sophisticated of plans, it was vague, it was uncertain, but it could just work. With everyone at each other’s throats, hopefully she and Anya would become the least of either side’s concerns.

Stevie was, however, due on the helicopter out that afternoon. What could she do in a day? And if she refused to leave, would she be brave enough to carry out a plan on her own? To risk losing her job—losing David Rice? She decided to find out what she could in the meantime and let fate decide.

Stevie rang London and asked for Josie Wang in Confidential Investigations.

‘What is it now, Stevie?’ Her voice, as ever, was sharp and impatient.

Stevie worked closely with Josephine because of the woman’s uncanny recall of the predilections and peccadillos of the continent’s most notorious faces, from politicians to arms dealers to B-grade pop stars. Her ‘greenhouse of human nature’ she called it, collecting new specimens like orchids or ferns.

It had been Josie’s recall of the Romanian crime boss and his harridan wife’s obsession with Swarovski crystals that had rung alarm bells for Stevie when Mr and Mrs Boldo Balan and the Swarovski heiress had been holidaying in the same resort.

‘We are drawn to what we know.’ Josie’s theory was that even crime bosses are unconsciously influenced in their choices by distant associations . . . it had all seemed easier then.

Stevie hoped Josie hadn’t been instructed to report back to Rice if Stevie called.

‘Josie, I need to find a man named Felix Dragoman.’

‘I know the name.’

‘What do you know about him?’ Stevie asked cautiously. ‘As a person I mean, not operations.’

‘Off the top of my head,’ Josie began, ‘I can tell you he is as hard as they come. He did some years in a Soviet prison camp—you can imagine what that does to someone and what kind of person can survive it.’

Stevie nodded to herself. Dragoman would be a completely brutalised human being. Of that there was no doubt. ‘Go on,’ Stevie urged.

‘The man is a trader,’ continued Josie. ‘He doesn’t discriminate towards what it is he buys and sells, nor to whom. The CIA and MI5 keep tabs as best they can lest he start offloading nuclear material to the Iranians or terrorist groups. Neither of which he would have a moment’s scruple doing.’
‘Any foibles, weaknesses, obsessions?’ The more Stevie knew about him, the more she could work on his suspicion.

‘His health, mainly,’ Josie replied. ‘And his appearance in general. Mr Dragoman has acquired a taste for the things that money can buy, including an impeccable designer wardrobe and a fresh new complexion. He had his face lasered and all his prison tattoos removed at the same time.

‘His big weakness is his vanity. He prides himself on his appearance above anything else and spends half the year and much of his fortune maintaining his face and body, remodelling, trying the latest surgical procedures from the States, monkey hormones from South America, you name it, he’s tried it.’

Stevie marvelled for the millionth time at Josie Wang’s extraordinary power of recall. The woman was a phenomenon. ‘About women?’ she asked.

‘Only as decoration. I don’t think he’s interested, women or men. People mean nothing to him. He seems to have formed no attachment of affection that any source can recall.’

‘No pets then?’ Stevie ventured lightly.

‘No. He’s a total germophobe—’

‘—just like Nicolai Ceaucescu and his terrifying wife.’ Stevie remembered seeing photographs of the murderous couple’s terrifying purple bathroom, with its myriad sinks and bidets and baths.

‘Only he does have real health issues,’ Josie went on crisply. ‘He has someone researching his health full time. Mr Dragoman inhaled radioactive dust after all. I’ve seen the military medical records—they’re stamped UNFIT. Apparently he’s grown a fleshy lump in his lung that shows up on X-rays whenever they check for tuberculosis. It’s apparently benign—only a deformity.’

‘I guess he’s luckier than some that he can wear his disfigurement on the inside, but it must feel odd to know it was there.’ Stevie was trying to imagine what the lump would look like.

‘The records say he suffers from sleepless nights, and sometimes he can feel it throbbing on the left side, under his heart.’

Then the image came strongly to Stevie, the man in his bed, the heavy swelling in his chest, pounding, like a second and corrupted heart.

Josie’s voice broke into her thoughts. ‘Look, you could speculate that he has a classic case of “messiah complex”—the deformity makes him feel like a monster or a freak, but it also makes him feel different, special, somehow singled out. Look at what it did to Asahara.’

Shoko Asahara, leader of the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan. Bioterrorist. He was born partially sighted and sent to a school for the blind. There he had been special, singled out, different because he could see where the others could not. Several failed bioterror attacks culminated in a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway that, fortunately for the intended victims, went wrong.

Josie was right—it could explain a lot.

‘I’ve got to run, Stevie.’

‘Thanks, Josie. I owe you.’

‘You certainly do and I won’t forget.’

‘One more thing, Josie.’ Stevie hesitated. ‘Where can I find him?’

‘Impossible. Everyone’s looking for him.’

‘But surely,’ Stevie persisted, her voice warm, ‘the big agencies might miss the detail that a fine mind like yours . . .’

‘Yes, yes, I know . . . fawn and flatter.’ Josie huffed impatiently.

‘I’ll get onto it. See if I can trace him. It’ll have to be from a different approach. I could try tracking down his health researcher for a start.’

‘And if he’s as vain as you say,’ Stevie added, ‘he will be getting beauty treatments, maybe plastic surgery, procedures of all kinds. Try the spas, the private hospitals . . . Start with Switzerland. It’s a national industry here. I have a friend who might be able to get the names of a few likely clinics.’

Stevie was thinking of Paul and his beautifully manicured hands. He was sure to know. ‘If Dragoman is in the wilds of Chechnya or in the middle of the Caspian, it’s useless,’ she conceded. ‘But he’s got to surface at some point. Good manicures are hard to get in Baku—believe me, I tried once.’
‘I’ll give that angle a try, but Stevie, you’re not going to go and find him if I do know where he is, are you?’

‘Why would I do that?’

Silence on the other end as Josie tried to decide what exactly St–evie meant by that.
Anya had tried hard to keep track of time since she had been kidnapped, but it always seemed to be night outside and she had given up soon after the phone call to her father.

Where was she now?

It was a bedroom in a tall house, an old house. The bedroom was small and, through the tiny barred window, she could see she was three storeys up, looking over a neglected winter garden, all frozen mud and dead leaves and faded wooden fence posts. It could have been the countryside, it could have been a derelict suburb anywhere. Thanks to Dasha and Ludmilla, Anya knew she was on the outskirts of Bucharest, Romania.

The two girls had been in the room when Anya woke up. For a second, she had felt relief—no blindfold, a proper bed, two pretty girls in jeans . . . perhaps she had been rescued in her sleep.

But in the next second she realised that happy girls don’t huddle over their knees and ooze black trickles of mascara from their eyes. It was very cold in the room and neither had taken their jackets off.

The door was locked. There were two single beds and a plastic chair; behind a paper-thin door there was a tiny toilet and basin. A hole had been kicked in the bottom of the door and the door handle was broken. Two shabby flannels hung stiffly on a rail.

The girl in the bright pink jacket spoke. ‘We can’t even throw ourselves out of the window—it’s barred.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Anya whispered.

She turned to Anya as if seeing her for the first time. ‘You would rather live as a prisoner? A prostitute? At the mercy of terrible men? I would rather die. But now we don’t even have the freedom to choose that. Our lives are no longer our own.’

‘Shut up, Ludmilla. Don’t say these things.’ The girl in the yellow jacket spoke, looking pointedly at Anya. ‘While we are alive there is hope.’ Then she said, ‘My name is Dasha. This is Ludmilla. We are from Belarus.’ She did not smile but she had a kind face.

The girls wore makeup and heels and Anya thought they looked quite grown up. But why had Ludmilla mentioned prostitutes? They didn’t look like prostitutes. They would have been about nineteen.

‘My name is Anya Kozkov and I am from Moscow.’

The door rattled, a key in the lock. All three girls shrank back from it as if from fire. An old woman appeared with a tray, behind her the shadow of a large man in boots. She put the tray down on the floor and the door was quickly closed, locked again.

There were three cups of tea, some slices of black bread curling dry at the edges, a jar of pickles, and something that might have been cheese. The girls drank the tea while it was still warm and began to tell their story.

Ludmilla and Dasha were school friends. They had answered an ad on a flyer taped to a lamp post: A Better Future Is Waiting! Needed: girls to work in Turkey as nannies for wealthy families.

Dasha and Ludmilla answered the ad. They were ambitious for a better life and longing to travel far from the muddy streets of their one-taxi town. They were young, pretty and invincible and the world was at their feet.

That feeling hadn’t lasted long. At the Ukrainian border, they had handed their passports over to the men supposedly escorting them to Turkey. They had soon realised that they were not getting the passports back; they had also realised that the way to a better future had turned into a dark path through a nightmare.

No one had touched Dasha or Ludmilla yet—apart from a few hard slaps to the face when they had demanded their passports back. Dasha’s lip had split and Ludmilla saw stars but they knew it was nothing compared to what could happen to them. They had heard the horror stories of girls being trafficked into dirty brothels all over the world and now expected the worst. And, they said, there had been others—four other girls in the van with them. Perhaps they were in the house, they didn’t know. So far they were staying quiet to stay alive, hoping a window would present itself to escape, hoping they would not be separated.

‘We started this together and we will finish it together.’ Dasha took Ludmilla’s hand. Anya wished she would take hers, too, but Dasha didn’t.

Instead, Dasha opened her tiny backpack and pulled out two bottles of nail polish, one pink, the other purple. ‘I’m training to be a beautician.’ She shrugged. ‘It might help us think of something else for a moment.’

Dasha took Anya’s hand and painted the nail on her index finger pink, the one on her thumb purple.
‘They’re cheerful colours together, don’t you think?’
Anya nodded.
‘You can do mine when I finish,’ added Dasha. ‘I’ll show you how.’
And so, in a garret on the outskirts of Bucharest, two terrified girls began painting each other’s nails pink and purple.
Ludmilla watched them for a moment then closed her eyes and began to pray.
The Hammer-Belles were sleeping late before helicoptering back to London. Stevie was in turmoil, having not slept at all the previous night.
Henning was still not answering his phone, which only made things worse: Stevie was beginning to worry about him in earnest.
She did some callisthenics, hoping to calm herself. It was not successful. The helicopter was arriving that afternoon and she could see no way out of her bind. She needed to clear her head with mountain air and exercise, and she needed some sensible advice. Fortunately, she knew exactly where she could find some.
Stevie pulled on her canary yellow ski suit, grabbed her skis from the boot room and headed outside. It was misty and cold, not a day to be outdoors and few people were. She would have the mountain to herself.
The valley disappeared into the mist as the cable car crept upwards. There were only two other passengers. One was a woman in her seventies in a purple and silver snow suit that made Stevie’s look conservative, and a determined expression on her face. The other was a younger man carrying a pair of touring skis, his legs in yellow lycra, a backpack strapped to his shoulders.
Brave day to go touring, thought Stevie. It was hard enough tele-marking in good visibility. He must be fit.
Yellow goggles obscured his eyes as he scanned the mountain below.
Stevie thought about how obscure, too, was the picture of the events around her. She had on her hands a villain who traded people, weapons and drugs like canned corn, his partners in crime—who happened to be politically connected heavyweights of indeterminable identity—and who were now convinced apparently that she, Stevie, was party to the inconvenient truth and ought to be buried. The young girl who had sparked off the whole debacle was still missing, presumably in the clutches of the villain, who could be anywhere. Her father was dead and Stevie was about to run off back to London and leave her to her fate.
Should she have tried harder to dissuade Kozkov? Had she made a terrible mistake in going to Kirril?
She thought suddenly of those signs in china shops: You break it, you own it. Only how did one pay for this?
The mountain was almost deserted. The cloud was cold and uninviting. Stevie left the piste and headed for the tree line. She did two quick turns then bent low, disappeared under the skirts of a large pine and waited. No movement, no people, no sound except the rumbling of a distant snow plough and, across the valley, the booming of the avalanche cannons. It was safe.
The fresh powder felt like silk on her shins and she glided along without a sound, bending and rising with her knees, turning her skis without effort through the half-buried pines, breathing in their resin scent, filling her lungs with clean air. She let her body sail through the turns, swooping in wide arcs, enjoying the freedom of a bird, the silence of the forest. She felt her body relax and her mind clear. The mountain was working its magic; there was peace in this.
Didi loved the mountains and she had taken Stevie up high at every opportunity. They spent spring tramping along the wanderwegs, surrounded by fields of wildflowers and streams of melted snow; then skiing and ice skating and sledding as soon as the first snows fell. The mountains were home to Stevie as much as anywhere.
Im Heimeli appeared below her, the sloping roof heavy with snow, the small stone chimney smoking away. A hand thrust open the wooden shutters of the single upstairs window and a white duvet was thrust out to air. Stevie’s heart did a little dance. Didi was up.
Minutes later, Stevie was seated on the stone top of the kachelofen—the woodburning stove—drinking a bowl of coffee and milk.
Peter, the gentleman cat, lay curled politely next to her, his tail sallying forth every now and then to stroke Stevie’s hand.
Didi sat in her favourite chair by the window and smiled at her granddaughter. She was a tiny woman who compensated for her bamboo-like frame by wearing tweed trousers and a thick, caramel-coloured cashmere jumper, a large cameo brooch pinned at the shoulder. She had swept her white hair into a loose and elegant bun, and on her
feet she wore tiny sheepskin slippers. A pair of old leather hiking boots stood drying by the stove.

‘What a delightful surprise, Stevie,’ Didi clapped her hands together. ‘We didn’t even know you were back in Switzerland.’

‘I missed you,’ said Stevie, smiling. ‘And I wanted to see what mischief was brewing at Im Heimeli.’ She looked around at the tea towels drying above the stove, the loaf of mountain bread on the breakfast table and sighed. ‘Nothing ever changes here. It’s marvellous.’

The interior of the chalet was all made of wood—Arve, with its fresh pine scent—and the smell sent Stevie right back to her childhood. She had spent hours warming herself on that same stove, Didi in the same chair by the window, drinking coffee.

Stevie’s bowl had been full of milk and honey then—Didi refused to give her coffee: ‘You won’t grow if you drink coffee, azizam—my darling!’

Stevie had stayed small anyway, but whenever she reminded Didi of this, her grandmother would say, ‘Imagine how much smaller you would be if you hadn’t taken my advice!’

‘Well, Peter and I are both as well as could be,’ said Didi. And indeed, the old lady radiated health and sparkles.

‘I can see that,’ Stevie laughed. ‘Peter’s even grown a little fur!’

‘The fresh mountain air does him good—it can fix anything.’

‘Does he ever leave the stove?’ Stevie stroked the gentleman’s new fluff. ‘I can’t see him stalking about in the snowdrifts.’

‘Of course he does. Yesterday, we went out walking. I wrapped him in my shawl and he sat on the sled while I towed him.’

Stevie raised an eyebrow at Peter who pretended, very convincingly, to be fast asleep.

‘I think he might be onto a good wicket with you, Didi.’

‘Well, you can hardly expect the poor man to wander out without his coat—’ Not wanting to offend her guest, Didi’s voice dropped to a whisper. ‘Even his paws are still hairless.’

She looked closely at her granddaughter. ‘And how are you little azizam? You look a touch pale.’

Stevie shrugged lightly. ‘I haven’t slept much. There are ghosts keeping me awake at night.’

‘Ghosts,’ Didi repeated. ‘They only haunt the people who can see them, the people who give them attention. It’s what they feed on, you know.’

‘I tried not to see them, Didi, but, well, one of them popped up at a party last night . . . Joss Carey.’

‘Oh dear. I really hoped he had fallen off the edge of the earth.’ Didi took a small rock hammer from a drawer in the table. ‘I found some beautiful old tiles the other day, look.’

She laid out several tiles in varying shades of blue—teal, aquamarine, indigo, ice-blue—and began to smash them into little pieces with the hammer. Didi liked to make mosaics.

She spoke in between hammer blows. ‘The best way to forget a man’—BANG—‘is in the arms of another.’ BANG. ‘Nothing mends a broken heart quite like falling in love again.’ BANG.

‘I’m perfectly happy flying solo.’

‘Rubbish,’ Didi declared, exasperated, the tiles on the table now a sparkling carpet of blue shards. ‘So you picked the wrong man: a mistake, but not a tragedy. It’s certainly not something you should allow to alter the course of your life.’

Stevie drummed her heels on the side of the stove, her stocking feet soaking up the warmth.

‘Well, I haven’t met anyone yet. I can’t help that.’

Didi’s long fine fingers sorted the ceramic bits into their separate colours. ‘As long as your eyes are truly open,’ she said finally. ‘Often it’s right there in front of you and you just have to recognise it. Love is not quantum physics, it’s a matter of clarity.’

She reached for the coffee pot and carefully refilled her bowl. ‘One can meet the most divine people in the world, but if one doesn’t recognise them as such, well, one might as well hang with filth.’

Didi took up the hammer and smashed a large piece of tile for emphasis.

‘I am clear. I think love was clouding everything. Finally I’m free of it.’
‘Joss wasn’t real love, Stevie,’ Didi said gently, putting down the hammer. ‘He was a sort of . . . romantic infatuation, and the two are very different things. When one is in love, one feels it is quite enough to be oneself.’

Stevie blushed. Her grandmother’s mind often had the uncomfortable accuracy of a precision-guided missile.

‘Anyway,’ continued Didi lightly, dangerously. ‘Who is this Henning fellow you went to Moscow with?’

Stevie blushed even deeper. ‘A friend—and just a friend. Don’t get ideas, Didi. In the modern world, men and women can be just friends.’

‘Oh I agree. I have men friends. Only at my age things are usually a little less complicated than at yours.’

Stevie understood, but it was different with Henning. They had grown close as friends . . . she was suspicious and he was mysterious . . . it would never work.

‘He’s—’ Stevie struggled to describe Henning. She watched as the cat stretched—more panther now than domestic feline, extending his claws—then leapt to the floor. ‘Well, he’s a bit like Peter really.’

‘A hairless cat?’ Didi and Peter were both looking at her with a degree of scepticism.

‘A gentleman,’ Stevie laughed. ‘Unusual looking, very independent, agile, quite unpredictable, but very kind.’

Didi held an ice-blue shard of tile up to the light. ‘Kindness is a quality most often underrated. I think it is also one of the most important in anyone close to you. Is he in risk as well?’

‘He says hecatalogues rare books for museums and libraries, hunts down lost literary treasures and curiosities all over the world.’ Stevie swirled the last of her coffee around the bowl. ‘He ends up in the most unlikely places—Istanbul, Kamchatka, Hyderabad . . .’

Stevie watched the caramel liquid spin. What did she know about Henning?

‘Sounds rather romantic.’

‘Yes,’ Stevie said slowly. ‘But I rather suspect he has something else in his past. He knows too many unlikely people for an academic, and he slips in and out of places like a ghost.’

‘Perhaps he’s a spy.’ Didi’s eyes shone. She had seen her fair share of covert operations in the war. She had been a code breaker and translator for the Allies when she was only nineteen.

Stevie shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. He’s too—human. But there’s something there.’

Didi stared at her granddaughter a moment. ‘Yes,’ she said finally. ‘I think there might be.’

Stevie hopped off the stove and went to sit opposite her grandmother. She picked out a teal shard and turned it in her fingers. She knew she couldn’t stay long but Didi and Peter were hard to leave.

‘What would you do, Didi, if you knew something terrible was going to happen? Stevie asked quietly. ‘If a girl might be murdered, and you thought you might be able to help, but you were forbidden to even try?’

Didi said nothing, her gaze on the shards, her fingers busy. Then she looked up, her eyes grave. ‘Helping would put you in danger?’

Stevie nodded.

‘In the war, our commanding officer used to say: your first duty is to survive; your second is to do your duty.’

‘David Rice doesn’t see it as my duty to help,’ Stevie said. ‘I do.’

‘Dear David worries about you, always has. He blames himself because he told your parents Algeria was safe. And it was. Until they were killed. He never got over that.’

Didi’s explanation made sense—poor David. Stevie knew from personal experience how heavily the guilt must weigh on him. Protecting Stevie was probably the only way he could find of atoning for his mistake.

‘Stevie, this poor girl won’t be the last one you can help—if you don’t get yourself killed.’ Didi’s blue eyes were dark with worry. ‘Do what you can without unnecessary risk, but don’t be foolish.’

Didi reached over the broken tiles and took her granddaughter’s hand in hers.

An hour later, Stevie was back on the mountain, making her way back to the Suvretta. The visit to Didi had sorted the broken shards in her mind. They fell like this: Stevie was in danger whether she pursued Anya or not; therefore her duty was to save Anya because there was a chance she could and no one else would; she would defy David and hunt the girl.

Halfway down the other side of the mountain, Stevie felt the vibration of her telephone in her pocket. She was expecting Josie’s call.

‘I hope I’m not interrupting you on the ski slopes, Stevie—’ Josie’s sarcasm bit through the phone.
How did she know? Well, that was the thing about Josie . . .

‘Good morning, Josie. How are you?’

‘The questions should really be about you. Rice is in an uproar and no one dares go near him. I’m guessing it has
to do with you and this whole Russian debacle. He would never get this upset about anyone else.’

‘Really?’ Stevie flushed.

‘Stevie, I know you’re half in love with David—’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Josie,’ she said sharply. ‘He’s the boss, a family friend, I respect him and—’

‘Well, whatever you want to call it, no one will ever measure up. Isn’t that why your relationships never work
out?’

‘You might remember that the last one failed because he was sleeping with another woman,’ she reminded Josie
with a snap, hoping to get her off the topic.

‘Ah yes. Joss Carey, artistic phoney. But you pick them that way, subconsciously.’

‘What is this, Josie, therapy hour?’

‘Listen, you want favours from me, deal with it. I’m telling you what you need to hear. No one else will.’

‘Josie, my mind couldn’t be further from thoughts of love,’ Stevie said, lying just a little. ‘And if I was having
thoughts, they certainly wouldn’t involve David Rice.’

‘What about this Henning I hear about? Rice is furious with him too . . .’ Josie delighted in the hearts of others
and she didn’t bother to hide the curiosity in her voice. ‘Do you want me to run him through the machine?’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Stevie almost yelled, terrified Josie might do just that. ‘I want you to concentrate on finding
Dragoman.’

‘Rice will kill us both if he finds out.’

‘Josie, please. I’ll be forever in your debt.’

‘You already owe me—twenty-four hours’ sleep and a lot of butt kissing.’ Josie definitely had a way with words.

‘You found him?’ Stevie asked, hardly daring to believe it.

‘Turns out he is a silent partner with the controlling interest in a number of health resorts stretching from the
Bahamas to Hungary. He uses his connections to get hold of often experimental, unapproved pharmaceuticals. Some
people apparently are desperate enough to try anything—they’ll take the risk and happily pay through the nose for
it.’

‘Where is he now?’ Stevie whispered into the tiny phone.

‘Right now, he’s in Switzerland. He rarely spends more than a couple of nights in one place. He has that many
enemies. But he’s going to be at the Verjuengung Klinik, a rejuvenation clinic in Hoffenschaffen, sometime within
the next five days. That’s as close as I could get.’

‘You’re brilliant. How many f’s in Hoffenschaffen?’

Josie hissed in frustration. ‘I’ll send it through by text. I don’t have time.’

‘Only you could have done it, Josie—I’m eternally grateful.’

‘Dinner at Nobu would be better, thanks, Stevie. I’ll make reservations when you get back.’ She paused. ‘If you
get back.’ The next moment, Josie’s voice lost its hard edge and sarcasm. ‘Stevie, the more I looked, the closer I got,
the more dangerous your man became. Don’t provoke him. You won’t live to tell me about it, I can promise you
that.’

Stevie felt the bile of fear rise in her throat. She swallowed. ‘You’ve done a marvellous thing. Make those
reservations soon, Josie. This will be quick.’

Stevie hoped she sounded braver than she felt. Not that it would fool Josie.

A walking track crossed the ski slope below her. Stevie was about to set off when she heard the soft jingle of bells.
A horse-drawn sleigh was approaching. Stevie waited for it to appear. She loved watching the horses plod silently
past, their breath in little white puffs—like dragons— their passengers rugged up to the neck in sheepskins, noses
bright red.

Hoffenschaffen. Now she knew where Dragoman was, things seemed more possible. And frightening. She only
had a few hours left until she was supposed to leave—still time to change her mind, obey David. And yet there was
a chance—even if it was a miniscule one—that Anya was with Dragoman. She could be as close as a few hours’
The horses came into view on the track below, both speckled grey and white. The driver was talking to them softly, encouraging them, keeping them company with his voice. There were two children in the sleigh, aged maybe five and seven—Stevie could never really tell ages—in little mittens and hats. She waved with one of her poles.

The older one leaned out and pointed his arm like a rifle. ‘Bang!’ he yelled. ‘Bang! Bang!’

Stevie lowered her pole, suddenly reminded she was still prey.

The fog had rolled in, veiling the pines in white and stifling every sound. In the corner of her eye, Stevie caught movement. She stood still and peered into the cloud. Along the sleigh track came the cross-country skier from the gondola, skating in his lycra tights.

He stopped just below her, where the walking track met the ski run, and looked about. Stevie was about to push off down the mountain towards him when she saw the high-powered rifle slung over his shoulder.

Bang, bang . . . The children must have seen him. What was he doing with the rifle? Surely target shooting was forbidden in the public areas . . .

The man pulled out a walkie-talkie.

‘I can’t see a goddamn thing in this shitting weather. It’s hopeless. Better to track a bear to its lair, my friend. I’m going home.’

Stevie froze, a wash of adrenaline pouring into her body. Not the most threatening words—Stevie would have agreed—had they not been spoken in Russian.

She felt the mist’s icy bite on her neck and her tiny hairs stood like antennae. Dropping to her knees, she was grateful for the uphill advantage. As silent as a mole, she waited in the snow as the man cleared his throat and spat into the snowdrift, then finally skated on.

Stevie couldn’t know for certain . . . but as she set off down the mountain, she felt eyes behind every tree trunk. Terror whipped her heart as she raced through the trees in fast, tight turns, spraying plumes of snow in her wake.

He is hunting you.

She sped up, moving far faster than was prudent through the forest, but knowing that speed was her ally and that the man on touring skis could not match her on a slope. When Stevie reached the bottom, the mist was so thick she could hardly see her hand in front of her face.

The chair lift clanged above her, the seats empty. No one was waiting in line. Shaking and red-cheeked, she breathed deeply. It was pure luck that the assassin had not spotted her. She needed to get off the mountain, go somewhere with people. There was some safety in numbers. Of sorts.

Back at the Suvretta, the skis safely stored, Stevie found a spot by one of the fireplaces and stretched out her legs. They felt wooden and a little wobbly—she had taken the last run very fast.

There were three hours to go until she had to be on the helicopter. Her little feet fretted in their ballet slippers. Her mind was made up, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t wild with nerves at defying David Rice. She needed to distract herself from visions of his Herculean wrath.

Fate sent her a waiter.

‘Fräulein Duveen?’

Stevie nodded.

‘There is a gentleman looking for you.’

Her body betrayed nothing, but the adrenaline was back like a shot. ‘Who is he?’ She almost choked on the question.

Track a bear to its lair.

‘A man of little importance,’ a voice said, from behind the waiter.

‘It’s you!’ Stevie leapt up in delight. There stood Henning, in all his tall, herringboned glory, smiling down at her. Her relief was immeasurable.

He swept her into a marvellous bear hug, dangling her feet an inch off the ground, then kissed her on both cheeks and set her gently back down on the carpet.

‘Stevie.’

‘Sit for goodness sake,’ Stevie gestured to the other chair. ‘What are you doing here?’
Henning sat and they ordered tea and a large slice of *Engadiner Nusstorte* each, the local nut cake, made with walnuts and toffee.

‘On second thoughts,’ Stevie called after the waiter, ‘I’d like a small pot of black coffee instead of the tea.’ She thought something a little stronger was required, given the shocks.

‘How is that poor head of yours?’ asked Stevie, suddenly remembering her behaviour in Moscow. She blushed a deep pomegranate.

Henning watched her shrewdly, the corners of his mouth turning up in a small smile. ‘Are you feeling a little guilty for running, Miss Duveen?’

Stevie nodded then shook her head quickly. ‘Kozkov fired me. I wasn’t running—I was no longer needed.’

‘I didn’t mean running from Kozkov, Stevie.’

Stevie blushed an even deeper shade of red and reached for her cigarettes. She had known exactly what he meant. Henning knew full well she hadn’t wanted to face him. She had taken, oh yet again, the cowardly way out and Henning certainly must despise her for it.

‘The hamper was very thoughtful,’ Henning’s lips twitched again with suppressed mirth. ‘And the note, very concise: “Stevie”.’

He reached forward with his lighter and lit her cigarette.

Stevie sat up very straight. ‘I was going to send orchids but then I read that Marilyn Monroe chose white cymbidium orchids for her winter wedding to Joe DiMaggio. It might have sent the wrong signal.’

‘Might it have . . . ’ Henning smiled wider and Stevie sat up straighter.

‘And for the record, Henning, I wasn’t running. I was simply in a hurry to get back. I feel bad I couldn’t stop in to see you but—’

‘But you couldn’t get away fast enough.’ Henning lit a cigarette of his own Turkish tobacco, inhaled and sat back in his armchair. The laughter left his eyes. ‘Poor Valery made a mistake when he decided he no longer needed you.’

Stevie blew an agitated plume of smoke. ‘I got him killed.’

‘He got himself killed,’ Henning said quickly, tapping the end of his cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. ‘You didn’t let him down—you didn’t let anyone down. I’m truly sorry, Stevie. I’ll never forgive myself for dragging you to Moscow.’

Henning was staring through the huge windows and down the valley. The fog outside drifted about in rags, revealing then concealing the frozen lakes, the black and white forests.

Stevie noticed the tightness around his eyes, the tiny lines of sorrow and fatigue. Her heart went out to him. He had lost his dear friend.

‘I should have stopped him, Henning. I failed to protect him.’

‘You had absolutely no right or power to, Stevie. It was Valery’s decision and his responsibility.’ Henning’s eyes were still on the frozen valley, his voice barely above a whisper now. ‘You are a remarkable woman, Stevie Duveen. I’m not sure I could tell you how much I admire you. More fool me.’

He turned to her. ‘Death always seems to crystallise things, doesn’t it? What matters, what doesn’t, who you really love . . . ’ His eyes found hers and held them.

Stevie felt something flip inside her; she found she couldn’t breathe as well as she might have liked to. Possibly it was the altitude . . . She broke away from Henning’s stare, a hand on her pearls for protection.

‘How are Irina and Vadim?’

Henning shook his head. ‘Not well. Irina is very thin, she won’t leave the house. Vadim has the rage growing in him. He is spending a lot of time with Masha, but he doesn’t have her clarity or wisdom yet. I worry he might do something drastic.’

‘These are some pretty drastic circumstances. You can’t really blame him. Are the authorities even looking for Anya?’

Henning paused then shook his head.

Stevie ran a despairing hand over her mouth. ‘Well, Kozkov’s killing made a splash—they have to do something about that. Have the police got any suspects or is it ridiculous of me even to ask?’

Henning shrugged. ‘The authorities have pulled in some Chechens—naturally—who have apparently confessed to killing Kozkov.’
‘Probably plucked off the street at random and forced to sign a false statement,’ Stevie said. ‘It’s funny how the Chechens seem to specialise in killing journalists and reformers. Bizarre almost. You’d think a top general, or politician would be a more desirable mark.’

‘A farce.’ Henning’s cigarette had burned to ash and gone out. No one was laughing.

The waiter arrived with tea and coffee in silver pots, and two pale pink plates with slices of Nusstorte. He laid the tea out carefully on the starched white tablecloth and left them without a word.

‘So,’ Stevie tried to dispel the gloom, ‘you haven’t told me what you’re doing here.’

Henning gave Stevie an odd look. ‘Actually, Vadim and I rather thought you might be in some danger yourself.’

‘Really?’ Stevie poured a cup of coffee and left it sitting to cool a little. ‘Why?’

‘Someone went after Kozkov’s files, too, on the day that he was murdered. Turns out he had a hidden safe in his office.’

‘The list,’ Stevie’s eyes widened in dismay. ‘And now it’s gone. It’s very dangerous information in the wrong hands. But how did they break in? Surely strolling into the offices of the Central Bank in Moscow isn’t like sliding into the Ritz. Do you think there were people on the inside there, too?’

‘It doesn’t look like it was an inside job.’ Henning poured a cup of tea from the pot. ‘Someone fired an RPG from the next building straight into Kozkov’s office. Not very subtle, but very effective. Nothing left of the office, let alone any papers in the safe.’

‘Everything gone. The list would have been destroyed, too.’ Stevie paused to take a bite of cake. It was quite delicious, buttery and sweet and full of freshly roasted walnuts.

‘You know, Henning, they went after me, too—on the same day. I suppose it was meant to be a simultaneous attack.’ She raised a pointed eyebrow. ‘Very tidy.’

Henning’s face grew still with concern. ‘What happened?’

‘They came for me at the polo. Oh, at first I thought they were after the Hammer-Belles . . .’ She took a small sip of her coffee then abruptly dropped the cup into its saucer.

‘Ech!’ Stevie screwed up her pale face.

‘Too bitter?’

‘No. They’ve put sugar in the coffee.’ She was indignant. ‘I can’t stand sugar in my coffee—what a silly mistake. And in Switzerland of all places.’ She stopped herself, realising she sounded a little hysterical.

‘Henning,’ she leaned in towards him and blinked in appeal, ‘may I have a cup of your tea instead?’

Stevie flung the offending contents of her cup into the fire, rinsed it with Henning’s hot water and poured tea from his pot. She took a sip and rid her mouth of the sweet coffee taste.

‘That’s better.’

She sat back and stretched her toes towards the fire. ‘Yes,’ she repeated, ‘they came for me at the polo, a single —’

Suddenly pain seared through her stomach followed by a wave of nausea. She tried to swallow but her throat refused, as if paralysed. Stevie’s head began to swim.

‘Hen—’ Her lips felt too numb to move properly. ‘I don’t—’

She stood and steadied herself on the mantelpiece over the fire. She felt weak as a kitten, her legs shaking. Then her face began to tingle.

‘Oh—the tea!’

With a slow grace—gold cigarette in one hand, tea cup in the other—she crashed to the floor. The cup shattered on the stone hearth and her head missed the iron fire poker by millimetres.

Stevie lay face down, spread-eagled on the floor, her cigarette smouldering on the carpet. The toe of her ballet slipper touched the corner of a burning pine log and quietly caught fire.

**Her little body was convulsing** now in sharp bursts, as if she were attached to invisible electric wires. The pain and anxiety Stevie had felt were gone, replaced by a complete lassitude. Nothing mattered now, not even that funny darkness that was creeping up all around her.

Henning was kneeling beside her, tipping her head back, putting his mouth on hers.

Stevie sat straight up like a shot.
‘I’m perfectly—’
Then she let out a groan, her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell into a bottomless abyss.

**Consciousness crept into her mind** like dawn through curtains. Stevie slowly became aware of her lips— parched and peeling and tight. Then of her big toe. It stung. She tried to open her eyelids but they were too heavy, sticky. She stopped trying to move and tried to think.

This was no ordinary morning waking . . . all she could remember was sitting by the fire with Henning, then a rather blissful state of floating, from the light, into the darkness. There had been a vivid dream about hundreds of grey and black cats swarming though a roundabout, over and over again.

‘Stevie?’ Henning’s face appeared close to hers, feathered and fringed through Stevie’s eyelashes.
Her eyes fluttered open. ‘I’ve been poisoned.’
‘Yes, yes, you have.’
Suddenly she remembered. ‘The tea! Are you alright?’
‘It wasn’t the tea, Stevie. I’m fine. The poison was in the coffee. Thankfully you didn’t drink the whole damn pot. The sugar must have been put in to mask the taste.’
A voice came from the end of the bed. ‘You would be dead if you had had more than a sip.’
Henning took Stevie’s hand. ‘Doctor Meinetzhagen here has been treating you.’ That explained the heavy accent.
‘A very strange and rare case to see in the Engadine,’ continued the voice. ‘We don’t get many poisonings around here—especially not from the *Oxyuranus scutellatus*, or taipan. You were not bitten but rather ingested the poison, mixed into your coffee pot. I therefore have concluded that your unfortunate poisoning was the result of a deliberate act.’

Stevie squinted her eyes and managed to focus her gaze. She saw a neatly clipped white beard, rimless glasses, a broad chest in a waistcoat. She let her eyes close for a moment’s rest. ‘Quite, *Herr Doktor*.’

‘We were unable to move you to the hospital,’ the doctor explained. ‘Had you been bitten by a real taipan, the situation would be worse: the taipan is extremely aggressive and attacks with no warning, biting numerous times with its unusually long fangs. The venom contains a clotting agent that can be fatal to humans in minutes.’
He approached the bed with his stethoscope and listened to her breathing. Then his cold, papery hands took her pulse.
‘The key is immobility, heavy bandaging and an antidote administered as quickly as possible. For this, your hotel bed was quite suitable for treatment.’ He placed Stevie’s wrist carefully back on the bedcovers. ‘Any physical effort causes the heart to beat faster and pump poisoned blood from the site of the wound—in your case, the stomach—to the rest of the body at a faster rate.’ The doctor cleared his throat and tapped his pipe on the end of the bed. ‘This only speeds up its noxious effects.’
‘You seem to know a lot about snake bites, *Herr Doktor*.’ Stevie’s voice was as weak as rain.
‘I spent many years in the Australian bush and made many expeditions along the North Eastern Cape. I came to know the serpent and his ways quite well.’
He was now stuffing the pipe with tobacco. ‘I keep a modest collection— I call it my *velenarium*—of serpent venom from around the world, and many antiserums.’
‘Lucky for me.’
‘Indeed, yes.’ The doctor nodded neatly. ‘In your case, bandaging was not possible. Immobility was achieved by the fact that you lost consciousness and the resulting decline in heart rate that accompanies the poisoning worked much in your favour. I set up an intravenous fluid transfusion—’
Stevie saw the giant cannula inserted into the vein in her hand for the first time.
‘—and gave you a shot of antiserum. Your lung function will have to be closely monitored as death in these cases is usually due to respiratory failure. I have administered some steroids to help the heart and lungs, and an anti-clotting agent. You will be as right as the rain, as they say, in ten days or so.’
‘Poor Stevie, the pin cushion.’ Henning was stroking her forehead lightly and Stevie felt she could almost go into some kind of delightful trance.
Then her befuddled brain kicked in and she struggled to sit up. Henning slid her effortlessly into place, plumping two pillows to make her comfortable.
‘Ten days?’ she croaked.
‘At best,’ the doctor replied gravely.
‘I haven’t got ten days.’
‘You are fortunate you have a pulse, Fräulein Duveen. In a fortnight you should feel strong again, although there maybe some ongoing effects.’
‘Such as?’ Henning asked before Stevie could.
‘Well,’ the doctor gestured with his free hand, ‘drooping eyelids, for example. Or a slow swelling of the extremities, possibly extra sensitivity in the fingers. In one case I know of, the survivor developed night vision after being bitten. It varies from patient to patient.’
‘Wonderful—I’m turning into Spiderman.’
The doctor looked at her sternly. ‘A snake, Fräulein, is not a spider.’
Sense of humour had never been the greatest attribute of the Swiss professional.
‘Quite,’ she agreed.
‘Bed rest for a week, stay warm and whatever you do, do not agitate the heart. Do. Not.’ Doctor Meinetzhagen actually waggled his index finger. ‘Perhaps you might have a small glass of schnapps this evening, to help stop any clotting. I will come back tomorrow and see you again.’
He lifted his flat woollen cap. ‘The police, naturally, will have to be informed. I will see to it myself. Adieu, Fräulein Duveen.’ He nodded to Henning, ‘Mein Herr,’ and with that the doctor efficiently let himself out of the room.

Stevie wiggled her feet under the blanket.
‘Ouch! My toe stings. Why on earth . . . ?
Henning said nothing. Stevie’s dignity didn’t need to suffer as well as her body. He could tell her about the flaming ballet slipper tomorrow.
‘It must be one of the exotic side effects . . . ’ She furrowed her brow. ‘Obviously someone is still trying to kill me. It’s rather terrifying, only I think I’m too dazed to feel properly frightened.’
‘To be honest, Stevie, I wasn’t sure how you would take Kozkov’s killing. I thought, when you passed out—’
‘What?’ Stevie was suddenly angry. ‘That I’d lost my mind? And there you were, saying how much you admired me. Guess that’s not quite true, is it, Henning?’
Stevie’s fear made her furious and Henning had no right to—well, anything, really!
‘No, Stevie. I thought you might have lost your nerve. It happens to the hardest men.’ He put a hand lightly on her arm. ‘And in any case, for the record, I rate human qualities like compassion, empathy and bravery over the robotic ones of immutability. If I wanted the unshakable, I would go and talk to a concrete pylon.’
Neither said anything for a long time but Stevie let Henning’s hand remain where it was.
Outside, it was already dark. The lamps illuminated flurries of snowflakes that seemed to grow heavier by the minute. Soon they would be the size of postage stamps, thought Stevie.
By now, she had missed the helicopter. David Rice would be properly livid, and trained assassins were trying to kill her.
She turned to Henning. ‘I am frightened.’
He took her small hand in his. ‘You have a good reason to be. I don’t think there is much doubt you are at the top of someone’s hit list but, now that we know “what” and “how”, the question left is “who”—’
‘I think I have some idea . . . ’ Stevie squeezed Henning’s hand, grateful she was no longer alone.
‘Our Russian friends who went after Kozkov,’ he supplied.
Stevie nodded grimly then said to her friend, ‘I think I’d rather like that schnapps.’
Henning smiled. ‘Perhaps that could wait until later,’ he said, teasing. Then, all smiles vanished, he said, ‘Stevie, tell me what happened at the polo match.’ He sat gently at the edge of her bed.
Stevie indicated she wanted to sit up, and Henning helped her, his hands so gentle. She took a deep breath and carefully pulled the strings of her mind back together and finished the story she had begun by the fire downstairs.
‘They were looking for me yesterday on the slopes,’ she confessed. ‘I’m sure I was followed. There was a Russian with a rifle—but the mist was so thick he missed me.’
Henning stiffened in alarm and she squeezed his hand without thinking.
‘About the snake poison, Henning. When I was in Azerbaijan, I saw this beach covered in snakes. Hundreds of them. It was horrible. There was a decrepit concrete building nearby—it was built by the Soviets for biological weapons development. They used the facility to experiment with different deadly poisons and they had a collection of all the world’s most venomous snakes.’ Stevie stopped. ‘Could I at least have a glass of water?’ Henning got up without a word and poured her a glass. When he sat back down, his hand sought Stevie’s and held it tight as she continued. ‘When the Soviet Union fell apart, the scientists abandoned the facility. They didn’t know what to do with all the snakes so they just released them into the reeds behind the beach. There’s not even a sign to warn people.’

Henning’s face was grave. His grip on Stevie’s hand tightened a little but he did not interrupt her story.

‘The assassin at the polo—Lazarev—was probably ex-KGB. He may be working for the siloviki now, who knows? They’re hardly going to flinch at a little extracurricular poisoning, not if it means protecting even a shred of political or economic power.’ Stevie swallowed. ‘They’d also have access to all the exotic poisons, remembering that the KGB used to specialise in assassinations—dissenters, deserters, compromised targets—using unusual and often undetectable poisons.’

Henning rubbed his forehead. ‘You’ve got to disappear for a while, Stevie. This is too dangerous. I know people who can make you invisible. It will appear that you have simply vanished from the earth. Eventually, whoever is after you will forget about you.’

‘They won’t forget, Henning. You know that as well as I do. I would just be buying time.’

Henning brushed a lock of hair lightly from Stevie’s face. ‘Time is not a bad thing.’ His hand cupped her face.

Stevie didn’t know how to respond. She saw the concern. ‘Thank you, Henning. You are kind, but I’ve thought about it. This is something I can’t run away from. As much as I might like to,’ she added quietly.

Henning looked at her long and hard. ‘So, what do we do?’

Stevie smiled. ‘Pour me a drink and I’ll tell you.’

That evening, reception rang to say the police were on their way up to interview them both.

‘Oh goodness,’ Stevie’s hand shot to her mouth. ‘I completely forgot Doctor Meinetzhagen was going to ring the police. What do we do?’

‘We’ll just tell them the bare facts: drinking coffee by the fire, felt woozy, fell down. They might let it go at that.’

‘Only they know me from the polo.’ Stevie made a face. ‘They’re sure to want to ask a lot more questions—about the Russians and so on. A man was killed, also poisoned by an exotic reptile. Two poisonings in as many days is just too suspicious to pass over. You know how thorough the Swiss are.’

Stevie’s mind ticked frantically. ‘The only thing to do is feign unconsciousness.’

‘I don’t think—’

A knock on the door interrupted Henning’s protest.

Stevie slumped into the pillows, her head hanging loosely to one side, her breathing shallow.

From behind closed eyelids, she heard Henning open the door, then two voices as polite and brisk as a shoe brush. They spoke in Schweizerdütsch but quickly switched to very correct Hochdeutsch when Henning excused himself, saying his Swiss German was poor.

Henning quickly explained that Fräulein Duveen was heavily sedated and could not be roused—even if this were physically possible—due to strict instructions left him by Herr Doktor which specified in no uncertain terms that the Fräulein’s heart was not to be excited. The sight of two such important-looking policemen, for such a delicate creature, well . . . the officers must imagine . . .

The policemen reassured Henning that they had no intention of unduly disturbing the patient, although the one with the deeper voice did suggest, most respectfully, that perhaps Fräulein Duveen’s fragility could be overestimated. She had, it must be remembered, last been seen hunting down a would-be assassin on horseback . . .

‘—and most successfully,’ added his partner.

‘Indeed, gentlemen,’ Stevie heard Henning reply in his most elaborate German. ‘However, it is possible to see lions hiding where there are only small, defenceless kittens, wouldn’t you agree?’

Having little idea what Henning was talking about, the policemen merely murmured politely in agreement.

Stevie had to concentrate on her breathing to avoid giggling.

The policemen approached her bed and stood looking at her—Stevie could feel their scrutiny. Henning must have
noticed Stevie’s struggle to remain composed and quickly suggested that he was prepared to be most cooperative but that perhaps it might be best to talk downstairs, so as not to disturb the patient.

**When the policemen had gone,** Stevie picked up the phone and called Doctor Meinetzhagen.

‘Sincere apologies, Herr Doktor, for calling you after hours . . .’

‘Not at all, Fräulein. I am still in surgery. What is it you require?’

‘I have been giving your prognosis a lot of thought,’ Stevie said gravely, ‘and I think I would be foolish to try to rush a recovery. I was thinking a fortnight or so in a sanatorium might ensure I rest properly and don’t overdo it. I tend to be rather high-strung, you see.’

‘A most enlightened idea. I can recommend several—’

‘Oh Herr Doktor, thank you,’ Stevie said quickly. ‘I rather had my heart set on Hoffenschaffen . . . I think it’s in the mountains above Sargans . . . A friend of mine was a patient there for a month and emerged transformed and with the highest regard for the staff.’

‘I know it by reputation.’ There followed a somewhat terse silence. The doctor cleared his throat. ‘I do not feel confident I can be responsible for recommending Hoffenschaffen to you.’

‘Oh I quite understand, Herr Doktor. However, I have the utmost confidence in my friend’s opinion. I would just need a note of referral from you . . .’

Stevie held her breath.

‘That I would be willing to provide.’

‘Thank you.’ Stevie’s relief was real. ‘I hate to impose but it’s rather urgent. You know how full these places get. Time is of the essence.’

‘Of course, Fräulein. I will leave a referral at the front desk for you on my way home.’

Stevie hung up and bit her lower lip. Step one of the plan was in place. She dialled Josie in London and told her she had been overcome with exhaustion and probably some horrible bug. She was going to rest at a sanatorium for a few days. Would she please reassure David . . .

‘I absolutely will not reassure him, Stevie. I can guess exactly which sanatorium you have in mind and it’s a stupendously bad idea.’

‘It’s not what you think, Josie.’

‘Of course it is. I’m not stupid. David doesn’t want any heroes around here.’

‘Well, I’m certainly not that,’ Stevie replied quietly. ‘It’s just a few days and I’m only looking.’

There was a very long silence.

‘Josie?’

‘I’ll pass on the message.’ And she hung up the telephone.
Where guests of the Suvretta might once have stopped at the sight of a man carrying an enormous red-brown fur coat through the foyer, extravagant behaviour on the part of those who could afford it was back in fashion and Henning’s passage went unremarked.

The coat had been purchased on impulse the evening before. Henning had just finished loading the two policemen with a nightmarishly detailed account of the fateful coffee—including particulars such as the size of the cake slices and the colour of the cups—when he had spotted the coat in one of the lobby shops.

It was enormous, made to fit an Atlas of a man, and particularly hideous. The sort of thing King Henry VIII might have chosen for himself. Henning had thought it perfect.

It was snowing heavily that morning. Henning’s Jaguar was parked right outside the entrance, under cover, boot open. The XK8 didn’t have a great deal of trunk space and so the fur was deposited in the passenger seat. The car, midnight blue with ivory leather seats, had been fitted with fat snow tyres for the mountain roads.

All this was duly noted by the concierge, who had strict instructions from the police that Stevie Duveen was not to leave the hotel. She was urgently wanted for further questioning. Her companion was free to go. In any case, thought the concierge, he had her passport in the safe and she could hardly leave without that.

Henning had paid both his bill and Stevie’s earlier that morning, leaving a very large tip for the concierge. Had the man been a little less preoccupied with how he would spend his windfall he might have noticed, as Henning strode past with the horrible fur in his arms, the tiny tip of a ballerina slipper—singed at the toe—protruding from one end.

The Jaguar purred through the hotel gates and began to gather speed on the road that wound past the frozen lake. The snow was falling thick and heavy, veiling the grey light of early morning.

‘Iii iiiff waahhhf,’ said the fur.

‘Stevie, I can’t understand you.’

After a brief, furry struggle, Stevie’s head emerged from the depths of the fur.

‘I was asking if it was safe.’

‘Oh. Yes, I think so. Not many people about on a morning like this.’

A snow plough, its huge lights almost blinding them, crawled past on the other side of the road, shovel raised like a prehistoric jawbone. A coach full of teenagers puttered along behind it, belching smoke in frustration. No one else seemed to be about.

Stevie struggled to free her arms. ‘What a hideous fur, Henning.

You could at least have bought something in my size, maybe tailored, and in a fabulous steel grey wool . . .’

‘A child-sized bomber jacket would hardly have done the job, Stevie.’

‘I don’t mean to be ungracious. I’m very grateful to you for smuggling me out. I must have weighed a ton!’

‘The fur weighs more than you do.’ Henning’s mouth twitched with amusement.

‘And so expensive. All I meant is that is seems a shame to waste it. I wonder what poor animal it used to belong to . . .’

‘I’m guessing orang-utan. It was the only thing big enough, and I’m sure it will come in useful before this is all over.’

Stevie turned and looked out the back window. The road behind them was empty. ‘So far so good, Henning. No police, no suspicious Russians. I’ll have to use my British passport at the clinic.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry we had to leave your Swiss one behind.’

Stevie shrugged. ‘I’ll get it back. A foreign passport is less suspicious anyway. The Swiss rarely use their own sanatoriums. They’re too healthy to need rest cures. They’ve always been patronised mainly by foreigners, especially the English.’

Stevie flipped down the passenger mirror and examined her face. She felt ghastly. Dark rings had collected under her eyes overnight and her pallor was frightening.

‘What do you think?’ She turned to Henning. ‘A Scottish lass with tubercular tendencies perhaps? I’m certainly pale enough.’
‘You don’t think being poisoned by a taipan is enough?’ Henning’s blue eyes were glued to the icy road.
‘I think it might be too exotic. We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves.’
‘Could Dragoman recognise us? They may have been watching the Kozkovs, seen us with Vadim.’
Stevie nodded slowly. ‘It’s possible, but it’s a risk we have to take.’
‘Speaking of risk, I still think you’re mad to do this and I wish I could stop you.’ Henning spoke quietly, his face impassive. ‘The only reason I’m helping you is that I guess—I know—that you would go ahead and do it without me. And I got you into this mess in the first place. I might even be useful.’ He turned and glanced at Stevie. ‘But you’re still mad.’

Stevie watched a lone langlaufer swoosh his way across the frozen lake, half hidden by the snowstorm. She thought of the Russian with the rifle.

‘I’m glad you’re coming with me, Henning.’ She said it softly but she meant it.
Henning looked over at her again and gave her a small smile. ‘Me too, Stevie. Me too.’
Stevie looked away. ‘You don’t like my cover story . . .’
‘I’m just not convinced about the tuberculosis.’
‘But it is so old-world glamorous,’ Stevie protested. ‘The consumptive coughing up blood by the shores of the Swiss lake.’

‘Perhaps if you had recently been to China or Latin America it might make more sense. In wealthy countries, TB remains a disease of the poorest. Perhaps if you had a malnourished housemaid . . . Haven’t you got anything that we can get fixed?’
Stevie thought for a minute. ‘My middle toe is longer than my big toe . . .’
Henning raised an eyebrow. ‘Anything else?’
‘I’m allergic to peppermint, and maraschino cherries.’
‘Right.’

Henning watched Stevie, who was busy drawing her initials with the tip of her finger on the misted window. In the half-dark, the fur around her shoulders edging her jaw, her profile could have belonged to a 1940s movie star.
‘Well,’ he said finally. ‘What do your celebrity clients complain of?’
Stevie frowned. ‘Exhaustion usually, which is code for drug and alcohol abuse.’
‘Ah yes, the old “tired and emotional”. That might do nicely. But won’t Meinetzhagen have put the details of your poisoning in the reference?’

‘For that, I am counting on the borderline obsessive discretion of the Swiss.’
Stevie pulled out the doctor’s reference. She read the three lines quickly.
‘The good doctor has gone with a simple “rest cure recommended, your sincerely”.’
‘So,’ Henning said. ‘Exhaustion it is.’
Stevie nodded. ‘Yes, I’ll be a film starlet on a “cleanse” before the release of her new movie.’
Henning thought for a minute. ‘But won’t the sanatorium staff wonder why they’ve never heard of you? Are you going to assume the identity of some Hollywood gal-about-town?’
‘That would be difficult for two reasons, Henning: one, we don’t have time to rustle up any false documents and the Swiss always need to see a passport; and two, I don’t look remotely like anyone famous.’
‘So . . .’ Henning looked at her questioningly.
‘So, we tell them that I’m big in television and that my new film is about to come out and when it does I am going to be huge.’
‘Huge?’
‘HUGE.’
Henning grinned and touched his GPS screen. A map of Switzerland spun into view.
‘We go down all the way to Chur, then along the valley past Bad Ragaz, then Sargans. Hoffenschaffen is in the mountains above it, at the end of a valley.’
‘Meaning no-through traffic.’ Stevie pointed to the spot on the map. ‘Anyone coming in or out of the valley will be noticed. A good spot to choose if you’re security conscious.’
Henning nodded. ‘It’s also right on the border with Liechtenstein, a stone’s throw from Austria. Easy to just slip out of the country if things turn.’ He gave Stevie a look. ‘We’ve got about two hours before we reach Hoffenschaffen. You should try to rest a little. Remember, you are poisoned and a genuine convalescent.’

‘I’m fine. Anyway, it will just make me more authentic. Paul said they do vitals when a patient checks in. I can’t be too healthy.’

Henning shook his head. ‘You’re not. What else did Paul tell you about the clinic?’

‘It’s very exclusive—not many guests. I think they can take a maximum of twenty-five patients/guests at a time. The staff-to-inmate ratio is very high.’

‘If they are that cautious,’ Henning mused, ‘I suppose I’ll need a cover, too.’

Stevie thought about this, scanning her memory for scenarios they might use. She found one.

‘Last year, there was an up-and-coming young music star. She checked into a clinic citing “exhaustion and dehydration” after a horse tranquilliser binge brought on by the pressures of a stalker—who turned out to be her estranged father, by the way. Anyway, the details aren’t important but she had a special “Health and Image” supervisor. He was a sort of manager, drug dealer, fashion stylist and yes-man all at once—’

‘That sounds like a role tailor-made to fit me, Stevie,’ Henning said with considerable scepticism. ‘Especially since I know nothing about show business, have never even worn a pair of jeans, and smoke and drink, possibly excessively.’

‘But that’s the point,’ Stevie gestured emphatically. ‘No one in Hollywood is who they say they are.’

‘But this isn’t Hollywood. This is a very particular Swiss clinic. The staff won’t believe it.’

‘Of course they will,’ Stevie insisted. ‘In my dealings with divas, I have realised anything is possible and the most outrageous demands are rarely questioned.’

With that, she rested her head against the window and fell into a deep sleep.

As they rounded the last rocky precipice that hid this valley from the one before, the sanatorium came into view.

It had been built towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the railways had opened Switzerland to tourists, most notably the English, coming in search of healthy air. The building was rather imposing, eight stories high, built in grey stone and peppered with windows, their wooden shutters painted forest green. Four small towers rose in each corner, their tops crenellated. A Swiss flag writhed around on a flag pole.

Hoffenschaffen perched on a granite rise, its back to a jagged granite cliff. A thick pine forest circled the rise like a felt skirt. The cliff face was bearded with milky blue icicles several stories high, once-quick rivulets and waterfalls that had frozen to smooth, still fingers of ice.

At the bottom of the precipice, where the sun’s rays would never reach, there flowed an indigo river only a couple of metres wide. It was a forbidding place, even from a distance.

‘Not the sort of place one immediately associates with good health and sparkling vigour, is it?’ Henning lifted a wry eyebrow.

Stevie wanted to say something light in reply but the shadows, the stone, the ice, seemed to have taken away her sunshine.

The sanatorium disappeared as they rounded another bend, then reappeared closer as they circled up in wide loops towards the granite rise. This time it was possible to see several cars—all dark, gleaming, expensive—parked in a gravel lot at the front; a helicopter waited patiently on a helipad, its rotors moving slowly to stop them icing up.

Henning pulled the Jaguar into the lot and stopped in front of the entrance. Stevie was now sitting in the back seat, wearing the fur and a large pair of sunglasses.

A thin man with gingery hair and a neat blue suit scuttled efficiently towards them and introduced himself as Gunnar Gobb, manager.

The place at first glance had little to suggest a modern health clinic. The proportions were vast, a legacy of a more generous time, with heavy wood panels and perfectly polished herringbone floors. The lighting was dim, with wall sconces and floor lamps with soft fabric shades illuminating the vast rooms. A wildly floral carpet in raspberry, turquoise and gold ran the length of the hall.

The reception opened into a vast circular room with triple-height windows that looked out over the woods to one side and the precipice to the other. On the other side of the river, right on the edge of the cliff, Stevie could now see the ruins of a small castle.
Turquoise velvet curtains ran from the moulded plaster ceiling to the floor. Groups of three or four heavily upholstered armchairs squatted around hexagonal coffee tables, and a small glittering bar nestled under a raphis palm on one side. Somewhere, a pianist was playing Chopin and, above it all, a huge panelled skylight let in the day.

Henning did all the talking. Stevie had assured him up-and-coming starlets never spoke directly to hotel staff and the arrangement suited her rather well as she was feeling particularly light-headed. This she blamed on nerves rather than toxic after-effects of Australian snake venom.

Gunnar Gobb took Doctor Meinetzhagen’s reference and filed it.

‘A nurse will be sent to Miss Duveen’s room,’ he informed them crisply. ‘A cure programme will then be drawn up for her, including rigorous diet and therapeutic treatments. Medications will also be pre-approved for administration. A psychologist will see her in the morning.’

‘I don’t think a psychologist—’

Gunnar Gob neatly hemmed Henning’s protest, ‘We at Hoffen-schaffen believe in, shall we say, the holistic approach. A psychologist, I think you will find, will be most enlightening.’

Gunnar Gobb’s wide smile repelled all argument.

The rooms in the sanatorium were palatial, furnished with armchairs in pale velvets, a thick navy carpet, heavy curtains and a large bed covered in a crisp white coverlet. On the door, a small brass plate with the name of the room: Piz Buin.

There were several windows with a spectacular view of the trees in the mist, the ruined castle, but no balcony, which really was quite fortunate because straight below the window was a sheer drop to the bottom of the gorge. The indigo river ran invisible between the rocky walls, the sound echoing upwards so you could hear it even with the windows closed.

If you fell, Stevie thought, you would fall forever.

Stevie’s medical check took place in the west wing of the sanatorium: heated stone floors laid in seamless blocks and lights with ice-blue bulbs. On one side, the rock wall of the mountain was laid bare, the mica flecks in the granite glittering, fools gold.

It was warm and very quiet. A uniformed nurse pushed Stevie, now safely ensconced in a wheelchair, past the sauna and steam rooms. Henning followed close behind. Huge steel buckets of ice water teetered on the end of a rope in a shower area. A mound of snow, also lit with blue light, gathered in a stone basin to one side. On the other side, a wall of water jets waited.

They were shown the swimming pool. Here too the lights were dim and the effect was odd—so different to the bright fluorescence of ordinary indoor pools. Tiled in dark blue ceramic, and with the steam rising off it in tails, it looked more like the entrance to some ancient underworld than a centre for hydrotherapy.

The nurse whisked them on. Stevie’s sunglasses made it difficult to see properly in the half-light and her fur coat overflowed from the wheelchair, dragging along behind like a royal train.

The nurse had not turned a hair at Stevie’s get-up. They obviously got all kinds at Hoffenschaffen. Stevie had thought it best to be prepared for anything, even if she wasn’t quite sure what that anything would be.

They moved on through the dim corridors, past Turkish baths, hydrotherapy pools, shower rooms, massage rooms, meditation caves, treatment suites, and exercise studios filled with pilates balls, wooden frames and mysterious machines. Stevie thought she spotted a gyroniser—Sandy Belle’s awful spinning machine—and was relieved that exercise was forbidden on her programme.

The nurse stopped at a door marked Prüffenmitte—testing centre. ‘Please,’ she gestured. ‘This way.’

The room was not overly large, the walls tiled in gleaming white. Various electronic monitoring machines mounted on wheels stood neatly along one wall. A huge treadmill stood in the centre of the room, hoses and suction cups hung off it like some horrid mechanical squid.

The next hour passed—was it really only an hour?—in a jigsaw of tests for Stevie. The nurse’s cold, chalky hands took her pulse, listened to her heart, undressed Stevie completely. She stuck her with needles and drew blood through butterfly tubes, efficiently, without speaking.

Out came a pair of callipers and Stevie’s skin was pinched all over, apparently an effort to measure subcutaneous fat percentages; Stevie was deemed undernourished by an uncompromising wall chart, her reflexes were tested, her pupils, ears and nostrils examined.

The whole process felt surreal. Stevie felt rather helpless in the face of all the technology, the efficiency, the
charts, the cream-coloured boxes that housed the gas chromatograph and a mass spectrometer for testing blood. She was glad of Henning’s solid presence just outside the door.

Finally the nurse called him back in.

‘The preliminary results of the blood test can only determine which basic category of toxin is present. Miss Duveen’s blood contains a venom of some kind.’ Here the nurse paused and raised a querying glance at Henning. He made no comment.

‘The samples will now have to be tested for specific toxins within that category,’ she continued. ‘Certainly we can say at this stage that Miss Duveen has poisoned herself quite severely. With what, it remains to be seen.’

The nurse’s tone was as hard and perfect as a ceramic bowl.

‘It’s been a rough month, shooting film after film,’ Henning lowered his voice and bent his head towards the nurse, taking her into his confidence. ‘Oscar week is always an emotional time for actors . . . She’s very sensitive. All actors are, you know, it’s part of the craft.’

The nurse’s expression betrayed nothing.

Stevie was impressed with Henning’s performance. He really was very convincing. She realised her hands and knees were quivering, possibly from her exquisite sensitivity, more likely from the effects of the poison which remained in her system.

The recommendations for Stevie’s treatment programme involved multiple steam-room visits, ice baths, and a rigorous diet plan. The nurse finished by snapping a green plastic bracelet on her wrist, the kind they use in hospitals and at music festivals.

This mission was not going to be all sugar flowers and sunshine . . .

**The psychologist came at dusk,** knocked efficiently at the door. Ste-vie, still fragile from her battery of tests, fled instinctively into the bathroom.

‘Henning, I can’t possibly. Tell her to go away.’

‘The manager was really very firm on this point, Stevie,’ Henning said through the bathroom door.

‘Are you mad?’

‘Are you afraid of what she’ll uncover?’ Henning was obviously amused, which Stevie thought quite unseemly.

‘Of course I am. Any sane person would be. Now tell her to push off.’

She locked the bathroom door. Through it, she could hear Hen-ning, charming, persuasive, smooth as Carrara marble; the psychologist’s voice at first sharp, then softening to his tones. It was a side of Henning she had not yet seen. It surprised her that he could be so . . . effortlessly seductive. She was shocked to find that she felt almost—and irrationally—jealous.

A soft tap on the bathroom door, then Henning’s voice. ‘She’s gone.’

Stevie unlocked the door but kept it shut.

‘You might be interested to know,’ he said, the by-now familiar amusement dancing in his voice, ‘even without meeting you, she was able to suspect you were suffering from a schizophrenic withdrawal from people.’

Stevie really had no comeback in the face of science. She was starting to feel like an experiment.

‘However,’ Henning continued, ‘considering that you are on the run from Russian assassins, withdrawal would seem to be the sanest state to be in, wouldn’t you say?’

Stevie opened the door and poked her head out.

‘I like the way you think. Now, how about a sundowner?’

‘I’m not sure they have a minibar. This is a sanatorium, you know.’

A crestfallen Stevie emerged from the bathroom. ‘I suppose you’re right. But Doctor Meinetzhagen did say it was okay . . .’

From deep inside his herringbone overcoat Henning produced a flask. ‘For emergencies only. But I think a visit from the sanatorium psychologist counts.’

Stevie laughed and impulsively kissed Henning on the cheek, her hand on his chest. ‘I just adore you.’

He grabbed her delicate wrist and held her there.

Stevie’s pulse thundere in her ears. ‘Henning . . .’

They were standing too close—balancing on that finest line that separates friends from lovers. Stevie hesitated—
moving even a millimetre forward was a commitment she wasn’t ready to make; but she couldn’t quite bring herself to step backwards either.

Didi’s phrase filled her head over and over, pushing out all other thoughts like a torrential stream: ‘in the arms of another’.

Stevie’s lips parted before the words were ready to be spoken.

‘We don’t do this, Henning.’ Her voice was barely a whisper. ‘This isn’t us . . .’

Neither of them moved.

Suddenly the memory of Joss flashed in Stevie’s mind, the gold python eyes, how close she had come to danger. She couldn’t kiss Henning just to forget Joss Carey.

She turned her head a fraction and broke the spell. Henning was worth more than that.

The floor began to swing slowly from side to side. Stevie realised her heart was pounding as if she had run up six flights of stairs; she could feel her pulse beating on her skin, her temples, her stomach and it made her feel queasy. Unsteadily, she reached out for the armchair.

Henning gripped her upper arm and lowered her gently into the chair. His other hand was on her wrist. ‘Your pulse is racing. Should I call a doctor?’

Stevie groaned. ‘No. I feel . . . like a feather in a gale—no, more like an egg in a blender. It’ll pass.’

‘Perhaps,’ Henning said, seeing Stevie’s hand reach for his flask, ‘the whisky could wait . . .’

The pale hand stopped. ‘Au contraire, Henning.’ Stevie gave a wan smile. ‘I think it will be just the thing.’ The hand completed its journey.

‘I’ll tell you a story about this place.’ Henning sat down on the chair next to her and took custody of the flask again. ‘It’s rather sad.’

‘Go on,’ said Stevie, feeling decidedly better as the fire water warmed her empty stomach. ‘I need a treat after my afternoon with Rosa Klebb and her pinching henchmen, to say nothing of being diagnosed as a social misfit. My dignity may never recover.’

‘See the castle there, on the other side of the gorge?’ Henning pointed through the window. The light was fading fast but the ruin could just be seen. ‘It was built in the Dark Ages, before Switzerland existed, when it was a cluster of cantons and principalities. In this castle there lived a prince. Everyone was always at war with everyone else and this particular castle was under siege by the army of a Teutonic king.

‘The prince and his men fought valiantly against the enemy but they were massively outnumbered and the inhabitants of the castle were slaughtered to the last chicken. Only the prince remained and fought on, mounted on his white war stallion.’ He took a swallow of whisky from the flask.

‘The Teutonic king very much wanted to catch him alive and present him as a prize to his people back home. He was a rather glorious prince. The invaders chased him to the tip of the cliff, right there.’

Henning pointed to the northern-most tip of the castle, to a rocky ledge just below the walls.

‘They were convinced now they had him,’ he continued. ‘He was trapped on his horse with nowhere to go. But the prince showed no fear.

He dismounted and tied a blindfold gently over his horse’s eyes. Then he got back into the saddle and, with a magnificent battle cry, spurred the horse forward.’ Henning pocketed the flask and finished the story in a single breath.

‘Stallion and rider sailed over the cliff and into the void, dying in a blaze of glory and evading a humiliating surrender.’

Stevie was silent, picturing the scene. ‘Poor horse,’ she said.

‘He wouldn’t have jumped if he hadn’t been blindfolded,’ added Henning, his eyes on the fateful ledge. ‘The prince had to take him with him.’

‘Like the Egyptian pharaohs who took their cats into the tombs—’

Henning turned back to Stevie. ‘The early pharaohs took their servants, too.’

‘Rather awful really.’

‘People were possessions back then—I suppose sometimes they still are.’ Henning began searching the pockets of his overcoat, looking for a cigarette. ‘And the horse in this story was a symbol, as much as the prince.’

‘They fell to their freedom, I suppose.’ Stevie’s thoughts were far away, with the long-ago prince and the white
stallion. ‘I’m not sure I would make the same choice. I think I would be less brave and more inclined to try to make the best of a bad situation.’

‘Ah, but you are not a prince,’ said Henning. ‘The sovereign is a symbol, as much as he is a man. “The king is dead, long live the king” and all that.’ He found a cigarette, slightly crumpled, and began smoothing the paper with his fingers. ‘It wasn’t the flesh and blood the marauders wanted, it was what he represented to the Teutonic king. And by jumping, the prince stole the sweetness of triumph from his enemy.’

Stevie closed her eyes, sealing the memory of the prince in her mind. She knew she would want to think about him again. Then she glared at her friend. ‘Remind me not to let you plan our escape if things go awry here. I don’t plan to leap off any cliffs, no matter who comes after us, or what I might mean to a Russian assassin or whatnot.’

Without any warning the lights went out and they were left in darkness. A voice came through the PA—there was a PA system? Stevie hadn’t noticed—‘Lights out and time for rest, liebe Gäste, schlafen Sie gut.’ The melody of ‘rock-a-bye baby’ drifted through, soft music.

Stevie was incredulous. ‘We have a bed time?’

‘You have a bedtime,’ Henning retorted. ‘Obviously you haven’t read the recommendations for your treatment.’

‘No. That was your job as my assistant, Henning.’

Stevie heard him chuckle softly. ‘I thought it would be fun to surprise you.’

With the lights off, Henning’s voice had become rather desperately seductive, velvet in the dark. Was she going mad? Stevie wondered.

She didn’t want him to go back to his room. She wanted him to keep talking.

‘Will Kozkov have a state funeral?’ she asked, keeping her voice low and neutral.

‘I imagine so,’ Henning replied. ‘If we can get the Russian channels here we can watch it—I’m sure they will televise it. Everyone self-importantly sorrowful, mourning a man they are glad to see gone.’

Stevie shivered and leaned close to Henning’s voice. But hadn’t the moment already come and gone? Hadn’t she been the one to turn away? Only somehow it was easier in the dark to let go of—

Stevie interrupted her wayward thoughts. ‘I often think about Irina and Vadim . . .’

Henning flicked the steel wheel of his lighter and put the flame to the tip of his cigarette. Stevie watched as the fire momentarily lit his face then was gone, leaving only the glowing tip of the cigarette to float in the dark.

Why had she never noticed how attractive Henning was? Not classically handsome, but powerful and rugged, rather like the mountains themselves . . .

Was this the venom in her blood talking? Was she hallucinating? Or was she seeing things more clearly than she ever had before?

What did she really know about Henning anyway, if she thought about it? Stevie made a quick list of the things she did know about him:

—Henning loves oysters and steak.
—He prefers gin and tonics to champagne, whisky after dinner. He says it gives him sweet dreams.
—He is very strong and tall but he has feet like a cat and is gentle.
—He is a surprisingly good dancer.

Stevie wondered what it would have been like to kiss him.

**Breakfast was usually Stevie’s favourite** meal of the day; the promise that got her out of bed in the morning. Feeling stronger physically, she made her way to the vast breakfast room well before Henning. She was surprisingly ravenous.

Breakfast was laid out in the *Panoramahalle*, a vast rectangular room that doubled as a viewing gallery for the mountains above and the gorge below. A buffet was spread out on several long tables in the centre of the room. One was covered in muesli of all kinds: bran, flax, linseed, lecithin granules; the table next to it held mountains of stewed fruits and several jugs of green, orange, red and purple juices. There were the obligatory meat and cheese platters and then the bread table filled with every kind of loaf.

Stevie was delighted. Things were looking up.

Gunnar Gobb was striding efficiently around the room, stopping at each table to greet the guests. He showed Stevie to a table by the window.
‘I hope you rested well last night, Fräulein Duveen?’
‘Very well. Thank you.’
‘Sleep is the bedrock of good sense. It is all too often dispensed with, and we see the consequences of it here in Hoffenschaffen.’

He smiled and with clean, deft hands he unfolded a piece of paper that had been sitting on Stevie’s table.
‘This is the Murmeli Post, our sanatorium newsletter. It contains details of activities, weather forecasts and inspirational quotes. Enjoy your breakfast.’

The view up the gorge was breathtaking. The tips of the mountains were glowing a deep dawn red against the still-black sky, like fingers of lava clawing their way down into the valley.

Red sky in morning, shepherd’s warning, thought Stevie. She glanced down at the newsletter. A reminder that a Nordic skiing excursion would take place in the valley that afternoon was followed by the weather forecast: a heavy grey cloud with falling flakes. The Murmeli Post was expecting a blizzard, and temperatures of –5 degrees Celsius. So much for thoughts of spring.

Stevie was about to wander over to sample the delights of the buffet when a waiter appeared with a huge silver tray.

‘Seine Früstück, Fräulein Duveen.’
‘But I haven’t ordered anything,’ Stevie said, surprised. ‘I was actually thinking of browsing the buffet.’
‘The buffet is only for blue guests.’

Blue guests?
Then Stevie caught sight of her green bracelet and understood. ‘Well, what are green guests given for breakfast?’ she asked cheerfully.

‘Green is one of our more restricted menus,’ said the waiter, placing the tray on the table. There was a glass of deep purple juice, foaming at the top, and a small silver bowl of sliced beetroot. A dish of fermented goat curd stood beside it. Stevie looked at it in horror.

‘Guten apetit.’
‘Hardly possible,’ Stevie muttered. She caught the waiter as he left. ‘A pot of coffee please, and you had better bring some cream for it, too.’

‘Coffee is not permitted for the green guests.’ And with those devastating words, the waiter bustled off.

The wait for Henning seemed endless. Stevie passed the time ignoring her breakfast and observing the other guests.

There was a table of overweight Germans—two men, three women—all with gingery blond hair. They were tucking into mountains of hard-boiled eggs, celery and huge bowls of stewed fruits. They were wearing red wrist-bands.

An elderly lady, pin-thin, sat alone by the window. She was dressed in black, with a fat rope of pearls around her neck, and several wrapped around her wrists. She seemed to be drinking only juices and wore a purple band.

Three women, all with incredible hair and high-heeled knee-high boots strode in and sat down. Their cushiony lips and ageless faces suggested various improvements had been made to the original model. They spoke fluent French to the waiter and another language among themselves. Stevie guessed they were Lebanese.

Stevie was looking for Eastern Europeans. They were not difficult to spot. At a large table just to her left sat three men, all in jogging suits. Two were dark and built like doorstops. They both wore heavy rings, and thick gold necklaces and bracelets.

The third was tall and ginger-haired, with red stubble and a huge chest that ran seamlessly into his stomach like Hadrian’s Wall. Stevie silently nicknamed him ‘the Barbarian’. The three were demolishing a huge breakfast of plates of meat, cheese and smoked fish.

Dragoman was not among them—at least not as far as she could tell from the photos Josie had sent, and the description she had given.

Then a fourth man appeared, his back to Stevie. She started.

He was wearing a mauve jogging suit, shiny and rather tight. Not a tall man by any stretch, but he was as stocky as a barrel. He seemed to be fighting a battle against hair loss, the bleached hair plugs visible from the back. The man was covered in gold and diamond jewellery and wore large white running shoes in the American style. Three
fawn pugs ran snuffling at his heels.

This was definitely not the dagger-sharp silhouette of Felix Dragoman. This was something else entirely.

The men at the table stopped eating and stood immediately to greet him. They spoke Russian, but Stevie could make out several accents—Romanian? Hungarian? possibly Turkish . . .? They called him Bozz.

This wasn’t Dragoman—but who was he?

One of the men hurriedly pulled out a chair and the Boss sat. He turned in profile to light his cigar and, with a jolt, Stevie recognised him—the lips were unmistakable: they looked almost as if his mouth had been turned inside out, leaving his lips like small, uncooked sausages. Those were not the lips the man had been born with. He wore huge wraparound sunglasses with gold rims, rather like an ageing star of B-grade action movies, or a Southeast Asian dictator. Stevie might have been tempted to giggle had she not known just how dangerous Heinrich—or Heini—Hahanyan was.

Stevie watched him fawning over his dogs.

Sometimes she wished her mind wasn’t populated with faces like his. Surely it changed you, to even hold the impression of his features in your mind, knowing who he was and what he did? Perhaps it was the catalogue of all the faces that brought her her nightmares . . .

‘Givenchy, kak ya tibya liubliu! Bacon, ah?’ Givenchy, the pug, responded with frenzied licking of the human’s lips. Heini’s voice was surprisingly soft, even feminine. He fed the dog small morsels with his neighbour’s fork.

At his feet, one of the other pugs was indiscreetly licking his balls. Stevie watched as he too, his work done, jumped up and began licking his master’s lips. It was enough to put one off one’s beetroot breakfast, thought Stevie.

‘Tseluyu, Calvin Klein!’ Heini fondled the ball-licking dog and looked down for the third.

‘Shlo ti dyelayesh, Adam?’

In reply, Adam lifted his little pug leg and peed on the chair. Heini scooped him up onto his lap to join his two friends.

At that moment, Henning arrived, freshly shaven and smelling rather inexplicably and intoxicatingly of leather and roses.

‘Thank goodness, Henning. You took your time,’ Stevie grumbled crossly.

Henning was brandishing a copy of the Murmeli Post. ‘Sleep is the bedrock of good sense. It says so right here.’

Stevie only frowned. Henning glanced at her breakfast tray and his eyes twinkled. ‘They’ve got you off the coffee have they?’

‘Order a pot of coffee will you, for heaven’s sake. Stop fooling around.’

A coffee pot arrived. Henning poured a cup and Stevie slid under the floor-length tablecloth with it. She emerged a moment later clutching her ballet slipper.

‘Here it is! I don’t know how I could have lost it,’ she exclaimed. She handed her empty cup to Henning.

He lifted the coffee pot. ‘Lost the other shoe?’

‘Listen, Henning, there’s no time for fun and games. There’s a table of thuggish types speaking Russian—Heini Hahanyan seems to be their boss. But I don’t see Dragoman.’

Henning reached for Stevie’s beetroot juice. ‘Where?’ he asked mildly.

‘Your four o’clock. The man who looks like Donatella Versace—mauve tracksuit.’

Henning sipped the purple muck. ‘This isn’t bad, you know.’

Stevie glared at him. Henning downed the juice then turned and summoned a waiter.

‘Another beetroot juice, please. Miss Duveen is rather fond of it.’

Henning grabbed an eyeful of Heini as he spun back towards Stevie. ‘Who is Heini Hahanyan?’

Stevie scooted close. ‘Once upon a time, they shot men like Hahanyan for profiteering. He specialises in swindling weapons, aid money, medicines, food supplies, anything provided by Western countries or multinational agencies to war-or disaster-torn areas.’ She risked a surreptitious sip of Henning’s coffee. ‘Sometimes it’s taking payment for contracts he doesn’t fulfil, sometimes it’s supplying faulty or substandard or fake goods, or even just walking off with a plane-load of medicines meant for refugee camps and then reselling them to other needy countries. The man is a gorgon. He also specialises in torturing and murdering anyone who goes after him, as two unfortunate young Angolan journalists found out in the 1980s.’
‘So he’s never in the news.’ Henning refilled his coffee cup.

Stevie shook her head. ‘Britain’s libel laws keep him out of the English papers, but you can read about his horrors elsewhere. Of course, his bloody profits are carefully laundered to avoid any excess profits tax anyone might be tempted to levy.’

‘Sounds—and looks—hideous,’ said Henning. ‘He’s wearing a blue band.’

‘What do you think blue means? Apart from the licence to buffet that is.’

‘I went scouting in the spa this morning. I spotted a chart with the colour codes and I was about to take a look when I was interrupted by a nurse—actually a rather attractive one.’ Henning gave her a wicked glint. ‘I’m sure we could get back there again.’

‘Is that where you’ve been?’ Stevie asked rather sharply.

‘Jealous?’ he teased.

‘Hardly.’ Stevie turned her head away and scanned the room.

Henning seemed always to be able to read her mind. It was disconcerting to say the least.

Stevie pushed back her chair, ready to leave. Henning laid a quick hand on her arm. She followed his silent prompting.

Two men had entered and were crossing the room. The second was tall and pale with black hair. He wore a jacket with a bulge under the left arm and carried a small glass bottle and a white handkerchief. But it was the first man that made Stevie catch her breath.

He was small—maybe five foot six—and very slim, with dark blond hair carefully blow-dried back off his forehead. His skin was very tanned and unnaturally taut, almost like that of a burn victim. He wore large glasses with caramel-coloured lenses, an orange cashmere rollneck and an Afghani shawl tossed over his shoulder.

He was smoking a cigarillo in a short ebony holder and Stevie noticed a large ruby sunk in gold on his pinky finger. On his feet was a pair of monogrammed slippers in red velvet.

The man turned to the window as he passed and Stevie saw it: a bald patch in the shape of a perfect crescent moon.

Felix Dragoman.

Dragoman and the dark-haired man shadowing him stopped at the table of ogres and spoke to Heini Hahanyan. Dragoman declined an invitation to sit.

They exchanged a few words then Heini put out his hand. Dragoman hesitated a moment and then shook it limply. Heini chuckled and spoke in Russian. His voice was loud and Stevie, intent on the Murmeli Post, could hear him clearly.

‘You look younger every time I see you—a miracle it is, heh!’

Dragoman nodded curtly, his mouth pursed, and moved to sit down at a small table by the window. His shadow opened the bottle and wet the handkerchief with its contents.

As Dragoman wiped his hands with the kerchief, Stevie realised the bottle contained rubbing alcohol. The man was a germophobe, Josie had said, obviously afraid of the dangers of human contact.

A waiter—Stevie now noticed they all wore white gloves—appeared with a tall glass of dark green liquid and a plate of raw meat. Dragoman’s bracelet was black.

He carefully turned the pages of a large book, its cover encased in plastic. Stevie squinted to read the title: Woodblock Etchings of the Bubonic Plagues of the Dark Ages, Volume I.

Stevie turned quickly back to Henning.

‘According to my friendly nurse,’ he was saying, ‘Dragoman has taken the whole west wing of the castle. I suppose clinics and sanatoriums are a good way to launder money, meet discreetly with business partners, and hide other illegal activities.’

‘And from what I hear he makes good and frequent use of their services.’ Stevie slid her hand towards Henning’s coffee cup, her eyes on the waiter. ‘Apparently he is kept young and virile by injections of monkey hormones.’

Henning raised his eyebrows sceptically.

Stevie nodded. ‘Welcome to the weird world of beauty, Henning—there’s not much people won’t do to stay young forever.’

‘I wonder what the story is with this Heini.’ Henning looked over at the man in mauve, now busy teaching his
pugs to beg for thin slices of Emmenthal cheese. ‘Are they in league? He doesn’t seem Dragoman’s type.’

But Stevie’s gaze remained fixed on Dragoman. ‘We need a way to get close to him.’

A nurse came to collect Stevie for her first treatment: a detoxifying immersion that was basically a scaldingly hot steam bath. Stevie followed her obediently down into the treatment rooms, followed by Henning who was planning to stickybeak when the chance arose.

Stevie shed her robe and slippers and entered the glass-walled hammam.

Inside she could hardly breathe or see, the steam was so thick. The air felt like semolina as it entered her lungs and she felt herself become light-headed. She lay back against the granite bench and closed her eyes.

She thought of Anya. Was she in the sanatorium, too? She shuddered and hoped Dragoman had not killed her.

The thing now was to make Dragoman believe that the men in Moscow had betrayed him. As she began to perspire, Stevie prayed for luck and courage.

The same nurse tapped on the door and Stevie floated out, her mind foggy. The nurse stood her under the huge water bucket they had seen the day before and tugged smartly on the rope.

Before she could realise what was happening, twenty litres of just-melted snow cascaded over Stevie’s pink and naked body, bringing her smartly back to her senses and covering her skin in burning pins and needles.

She gasped in shock and looked around for Henning, who was nowhere to be seen. Why couldn’t he have been the tired and emotional starlet, she thought crossly.

Stevie snatched her robe from the nurse and stalked off. Fortunately, petulance was firmly in-character for Mademoiselle Duveen, toxicomaniac.

Traipsing through the corridors, Stevie found she felt surprisingly better, considering the violence that had been done to her. She found Henning in the reception area, drinking lemongrass tea and flipping through French Vogue. She glowered at him.

‘You’d better have done your bit,’ she hissed.

Henning opened his navy cord blazer and Stevie saw the colour-coded schedule tucked neatly into the inside pocket.

Henning chuckled. ‘Sanatorium life obviously suits you—your cheeks are rosy pink like a little girl’s.’

‘That’s from the pain.’

‘Look, here,’ Stevie pointed to the schedule. ‘It says “black, blue, red and yellow, 12.00 Sonnenbad”. That’s where we’ll find him.’

They were sitting in the vast circular room they had seen the night before, with the turquoise curtains and the polished hexagonal tables. Henning looked out of the window. It was plummeting great snowflakes.

‘How long has it been, would you say, Stevie, since you’ve seen the sun?’

‘Forever.’ Stevie was sitting in an old armchair by the window in her bathrobe and sunglasses. She lit a cigarette and watched the snow for a moment.

‘We seem to be somehow stuck in the heart of winter.’

Two of the florid Germans, dressed in heavy corduroy and walking boots, sat drinking tea in a corner by a massive floral arrangement. A giant poodle gnawed a rawhide bone. Apart from them the place was deserted.

One of Heini’s men walked by, holding the three pugs on leashes as they scurried and snuffled at various objects of interest—the umbrella stand, a power point, the porter’s polished shoe.

Stevie sat forward, her eyes on the henchman’s vanishing back. ‘It’s a matter of grabbing Dragoman’s attention, casually. We can hardly go up to him at the juice bar and just mention, oh by the way, we’ve heard a man named “killer” from Moscow is looking for you.’

‘No,’ Henning agreed. ‘But it can’t be too subtle. We haven’t got the time for that. Dragoman won’t be staying long.’

Through the triple-height windows, Stevie and Henning had a good view of the road, winding down through a pine forest to the distant village. The postmaster drove up in his little yellow truck, a huge mail sack just visible in the back. A horse and rider clip-clopped down the road, the horse’s rump steaming in the cold. Everything else was still and quiet.

Something moved unexpectedly amongst the tree trunks—a dark shape flitting—and was gone. Stevie scanned
the hillside. The white blanket of snow turned every tree and rock that stood against it black. An animal? Surely it had been much too big . . .

**It was ten to twelve** and Stevie and Henning, in bathrobes and slippers, trundled down to the *Sonnenbad*. They were each given a purple pair of goggles as they entered the sunbathing room.

It was large, with a smooth granite floor, floor-to-ceiling windows that jutted out over the gorge and faced down the valley. The room was flooded with UV light and patients lay scattered about in green-and-white striped deck chairs.

Stevie spotted Dragoman sitting alone. His shadow was standing at the back wall, also in a robe and still carrying the bottle of rubbing alcohol. Heini had not yet arrived.

She took a deck chair directly in front of him and shed her robe, revealing only tiny bikini bottoms and no top. Stevie wasn’t quite sure what she would do once she had Dragoman’s attention but she figured it would be a start. She stretched luxuriously.

A quick glance sideways revealed that Dragoman wasn’t taking the slightest bit of notice.

Henning, however—

Stevie blushed furiously and lay down quickly.

Henning settled himself next to her and pulled out a copy of a Hollywood trade rag.

‘Can you believe they sell *Variety* at the concierge desk?’ He waved the publication at Stevie. ‘We can read what they’re telling everyone about *Monkeys in Paradise*.’

‘It’s all just a conspiracy against my talent, Henning. Anyone with half a brain can see that.’

Henning kept his attention fixed on the newspaper. He sounded bored. ‘Darling, you passed out in a pool of your own vomit.’

Stevie frowned under her goggles. ‘So?’

‘On set.’

‘So?’ she repeated, louder.

‘Twice in one week. You can see their point.’

‘Fascists,’ Stevie declared, examining her nails. ‘Studios are all the same—it’s all just money, money, money. What about art?!”

Stevie was glad she had Sandy and Douglas to draw inspiration from.

Henning became placatory. ‘No one will insure you, darling. A stint here ought to fix that. You’ll go home with your body—and your reputation—cleansed. Quite virginal.’

‘I don’t give a hoot for my reputation. I want a martini and a pink pill—and a tattoo,’ added Stevie in a flash of inspiration.

Henning ignored her.

‘You have one.’ Stevie pointed to Henning’s bare arm, her tone petulant.

She had never seen Henning with his shirt off. He was finely muscled, no more than an ounce of fat on him, strong but not big. On the underside of his forearm he had a tattoo of an owl in full flight. It was quite stunning.

‘What does the owl mean?’ She touched the tip of its wing lightly.

‘It’s my star sign,’ Henning replied with a smile.

Stevie paused for a moment. It was now or never.

‘I saw two men, you know, with the most extraordinary tattoos,’ she went on, her voice bold in the way of someone who has never been concerned about drawing too much attention. ‘When I was out walking this morning. I think they were Russians. They sounded like Nicole Kid-man in *Birthday Girl*, only male. One guy had a skull in the middle of sniper sight, like on *24* with Keifer Sutherland. And some words on the bottom—I think they were Spanish: *malo mori* something.’

‘*Malo mori quam foedari,* said Henning quickly. ‘Death before dishonour.’

He hastily added, remembering his cover, ‘It’s Rambo’s motto.’

‘Whatever. The other guy had his sleeve pushed up and he had a wolf’s head with horns,’ Stevie shrugged and examined her nails. ‘If you ask me, it’s a bit *de trop* on the hands, don’t you think?’ Stevie sighed and pulled out her compact. ‘Just look at me in these hideous goggles, Henning.’
Dragoman was definitely listening; she could see him in the compact mirror, reflected over her shoulder.

‘No wonder those Russians didn’t recognise me!’

‘I told you not to talk to anyone,’ Henning said wearily.

Stevie pouted. ‘They talked to me. And anyway, they weren’t interested in me. They wanted to know if some friend of theirs was here—’

Stevie adjusted her bikini bottoms. ‘At least I think that’s what they wanted. I could hardly understand their English and I don’t understand a word of Russian except vodka.’ Stevie laughed inanely at her joke. ‘Anyway, I told them I didn’t mix with the other guests and I left.’

Behind her, Stevie heard Dragoman click his fingers and felt the shadow detach from the back wall and approach. Dragoman spoke in Russian. After every third or fourth word, he stopped and panted, as if fighting for air.

Something was jogging her memory but . . .

Stevie listened as he repeated her description of the men with tattoos in rapid Russian, confident the two idiots in front of him wouldn’t understand a word. The shadow then disappeared.

A loud clapping of the hands and a chuckle announced the arrival of Heini. He was dressed in his own bathrobe, a shiny black affair printed in the yellow-and-black horse insignia of Ferrari. The ginger barbarian bodyguard followed him in then went and stood by the door. The pugs had been made to wait outside.

‘It’s bad for their eyes.’ Heini smiled with his huge lips. He really was a singularly unattractive man, thought Stevie.

Dragoman did not reply and Heini settled himself on the lounge beside him. Stevie could hear them clearly.


There was no reply from Dragoman.

‘Not enough meat on her for me though.’

Stevie could almost feel the leer creeping over her shoulder. She shuddered at the thought of Heini’s lips anywhere near her.

‘I hope,’ he went on, ‘that she will be present at my celebration— she is after all a guest here and we have no primroses in our lovely bouquet of flowers.’

‘You know I detest—breathe—your ridiculous metaphors, Heini. They—breathe—reveal a florid, philistine mind.’

All at once, Stevie remembered the phone call in the dacha— hadn’t Kozkov said the man on the other end was ‘out of breath’?

Heini’s chuckle turned into a deep cough.

‘Felix, you just need to get yourself a girl—heh heh—or boy.’ He coughed again then continued his train of thought, oblivious to the dangerous chill in Dragoman’s voice. ‘It’s not natural to go without sex. If I was in your line of work I would go crazy just trying to sample every piece of merchandise—crazy.’

‘I don’t know what you are referring to.’

That sleazy chuckle again. ‘Please tell me you get “high on your own supply”, as they say, every now and then!’

Heini slapped a meaty thigh. ‘Heh heh, you know, dip your wick?’

There was no reply from Dragoman.

‘Heh.’ The huffing Heini ran out of steam. For such a callous killer, he certainly could come across as a buffoon, thought Stevie. That, perhaps, was part of his success: to have people constantly underestimate him.

He dropped his robe and settled his fat, round belly on the deck-chair. He pulled out a cigar from his robe pocket.

‘Now, where’s that cigar?’ Stevie could hear him fumbling about, the crackle of cellophane.

‘So, how’s business?’

Now it was Dragoman’s turn to speak. ‘That is my business.’ His voice was slick and dangerous. It made Stevie think of an eel. ‘I hear you had a problem in Novgorod Oblast . . . ’

‘A minor flutter of a sparrow’s heart. Nothing serious, Felix.’

‘Sixteen infants dead. The authorities must want you badly. Very bad for international relations with our country if those in power don’t squash you very, very publicly. We are on our way to becoming a world power again. The eyes of the world are upon us.’
Heini belched softly. ‘Heh. I didn’t know the milk powder was poisonous. Who could know that? Stinking great Chinese factories— can’t understand a word they say, hate the place. I am just the middle man, passing on the product, trying to butter my crust, if you know what I mean.’

‘You’re a profiteer, Heini. Don’t operate under any illusion. No one else does.’

Heini lit a match; Stevie could smell his cigar, hear him puffing out clouds of tobacco smoke. ‘Do I care about anyone else? Don’t be ridiculous, Felix. Anyway, the right people have been, shall we say, rewarded to make me vanish from the scene like a whore’s panties, heh. The Chinese are in the bad books. They made the stuff. It’s not my responsibility if no one tests it at the other end.’

He cleared his throat noisily. ‘My only problem has been that sonofabitch Kozkov shutting down my bank and freezing my money— my money!’ Heini was sounding furious and getting loud. ‘If you hadn’t got to him first, I would have gone and done it myself!’

Dragoman’s voice was quiet, soft, dangerous. ‘I had nothing to do with it. It came as a great inconvenience to me. I needed him alive.’

‘Well I need my money and your friends in the Kremlin have a lot to answer for, letting this happen. Kozkov should never have got that far!’

‘Control yourself. What’s done is done.’ Dragoman’s voice was ice.

‘Why don’t you share your contacts with me? Turn your marriage, heh, into a ménage à trois?’

‘We have no need for a third party.’

Stevie could hear Heini puffing angrily now. ‘My business isn’t good enough for you and your Kremlin friends?’

‘Stop talking and listen. I have an opportunity for you to make at least three times as much as you lost. But you need to be invisible and untraceable.’ Dragoman’s voice was low and Stevie, in front, had to strain her ears to hear.

Heini calmed down a little. ‘I can do anything for the right price.’

‘I need anti-malarials, as many as you can produce. I have a contract to supply the entire UN mission in Africa.’

Heini seemed to be digesting this for a moment. ‘Under a front, I presume. Heh heh. The UN wouldn’t do business with a man like you.’

‘You may be attributing scruples where there are few—it’s a simple case of supply and demand. The market has no morals, only people do. And they are getting fewer. You, Heini, know that as well as anyone. But my contracts are not your concern. And get me anti-retrovirals, as many as you can manufacture in those vile Chinese hell-pits of yours.’

Heini tried to whistle but it came out like a wet, whooshing sound. ‘As well? You must be making quite a fat chunk of elephant out of those contracts. Bravo, Felix. But it will be expensive for you . . .’

‘Don’t get greedy, Heini. I won’t pay real medicine prices for fake pharmaceuticals. And I don’t have patience for games. Or do you want to follow Yuschenko in the beauty pageant?’

Heini was quiet. Stevie, engrossed in a gossip magazine, winced at the memory of the poor Ukrainian and his cyst-pitted face.

Dragoman continued in his strange, breathy voice. ‘Let us not quarrel when there is no reason to. Our interests are aligned.’

He coughed. Stevie smelt rubbing alcohol. ‘I even have a birthday gift for you, Heini, to show my good intentions in bringing you this deal.’

‘I am more interested in your money than your gifts.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Stevie saw Dragoman’s shadow flit to him with his robe.

‘My lawyer in Geneva is holding the amount of money I am prepared to pay you for your services. A phone call from me and the funds will be wired to any account you choose. I am sure that will be satisfactory for you.’

With that, he left Heini to continue his UV bath.
In the pale light of the winter afternoon, Stevie and Henning found themselves back by the windows of the main hall, staring out. This time there were a lot more than snowflakes to watch.

Armed men were crawling around the hillside, and even on the castle walls. They had passed three men in boots and guns on the way up from the treatment rooms.

The guests had been told, through the in-house PA system, that a security exercise was taking place with their safety in mind. The matter was routine and ought to cause no one concern.

Danke, und wir wünschen Ihnen einen angenehmen Tag.

‘Security exercise . . .’ Stevie sat across her chair, with the backs of her knees resting on the arm. She watched as two men outside frisked a holly bush. ‘I would say those men are looking pretty hard for something—or someone.’

‘Two men perhaps?’ Henning gave a wry smile. ‘With tattoos belonging to the Russian Special Forces?’

‘Trouble is, the tattoos I described were criminal tattoos. I don’t think anyone on a covert mission from Moscow would announce themselves with tattoos on their hands.’

‘Well the description certainly got Dragoman fired up.’ He shrugged. ‘You told me yourself that the siloviki use the mafia for all sorts of things—why not use them for killing? That way it’s all utterly deniable.’

‘As long as Dragoman sees it that way.’ Stevie fidgeted nervously with the antimacassar on her armchair.

Henning gestured to the window. ‘There’s your evidence. You’ve hit a paranoia button somewhere. That’s a small victory in itself. Dragoman obviously lives with the very real threat of assassination. It is not something far-fetched for him.’

Stevie stared at the commotion outside. ‘Maybe the plan is working.’

‘These things tend to gather a momentum of their own, Stevie, particularly when you are dealing with more paranoid personalities.’

She nodded. ‘I hope you’re right. At least we did find out for certain that Dragoman didn’t order Kozkov’s death, and that he was almost certainly the man Kozkov spoke to on the phone in the dacha.’

Stevie called the waiter and ordered a mud root tea.

‘Sounds very appetising, Stevie. One of your poisons?’

‘Almost.’

She had done a quick search of a toxins database that morning, hoping to find a way around the coffee ban. When the tea arrived, the smell wafting from the pot was of stagnant water mixed with head lice killer.

‘I’ve discovered that you can get a buzz off this if you drink enough—almost like caffeine. In the sanatorium, its use is restricted to narcoleptics and the obese, but I’ve managed to convince them I need it for my mental health.’

She downed two cups in swift succession. She grimaced, then poured a third cup. ‘It tastes worse than it smells.’

Henning wrinkled his nose, offended by the odour. ‘Is that possible?’

They went back to watching the armed guards.

The waiter reappeared, this time with an envelope on his silver tray. He offered it to Henning.

Inside the envelope, the notepaper was embossed with a gold crest—a dragon slaying a knight—and was as thick as cardboard.

‘The reverse of the legend of St George,’ said Henning.

‘And it’s addressed to you.’

Henning read aloud:

Dear Miss Duvene,

I am giving a dinner in the ballroom tomorrow evening for the occasion of Heinrich Hahanyan’s 65th birthday. All the guests are invited. It would please him greatly if you and your companion would do us the honour of joining us.

8 pm.

FD

Stevie took a gold-tipped cigarette from the slim, black box. ‘Surely that man is too hideous for birthdays?’

‘Inviting all the guests.’ Henning raised an eyebrow. ‘How old-fashioned.’

‘It’s rather delightfully “captain’s table” of him, I agree.’ She put a match to the end of her cigarette and drew on
the ember. ‘But what does one wear to such a thing? I ought to write in to Vogue: Dear Style Surgery, I hope you can help. I have been invited to a mass murderer’s birthday party. It is to be hosted by an arch villain and I am uncertain what to wear. Are feathers too provocative? Yours sincerely, Stevie Duveen.’

Stevie took another gulp of her mud root tea to quell the nervous fluttering in her ribcage. She made a face. ‘This needs vodka.’
‘Do we have a plan, Stevie?’
‘Just to get close and see what we can discover—or instigate.’
‘Room for improvisation then?’

Stevie put down her cup and rummaged about in the pocket of her robe. ‘I just had another idea. I’m calling Rosie.’

‘Who’s Rosie?’
‘Josie’s twin. She works on Fleet Street.’
Stevie pulled out her tiny, tiny phone. She saw she had missed a call from David Rice. Her heart sank. How could she explain all this? He would have to wait.

Rosie answered her mobile, snappy and businesslike. She was the less nonsensical of the twins.

Stevie began her buttering but Rosie cut her off. ‘Look, Stevie, I know your tricks. Josie tells me everything and I don’t have the time. What do you want, and what’s in it for me? Simple question, give me a simple answer.’

‘Okay, Rosie. I need you to plant a story in your paper. In return, you will get the scoop on something huge. It’s quid pro quo.’

‘Details, Stevie. What’s my scoop?’
She thought fast. ‘Remember the dead infants in Novgorod Oblast?’
‘The contaminated milk powder from China?’ Rosie’s voice was sharp with interest.
‘The powder was made in China,’ Stevie went on, ‘but sold through a broker who specialises in dodgy goods from the People’s Republic. He sets up factories there to make whatever people order. Mainly I think it’s fake pharmaceuticals and dietary supplements. By the time the buyers discover the goods are faulty—or even deadly—this guy has vanished and his factory is already making something else.’

‘So he knew this infant formula was deadly when he sold it?’
‘Put it this way, he didn’t intend for the children to die, but he couldn’t care less that they did.’
‘Name?’ Stevie could hear Rosie tapping away on her computer as they spoke.
‘Heinrich Hahanyan. I think he’s from Chelyabinsk originally.’
‘Is that it?’
‘It’s big, Rosie. And, in return, I need you to run a story on a guy they call “The Man from Chernobyl”. If the story you plant for me—’
‘—will try to plant—’
‘—has the desired effect, you’ll have a much bigger story about another monster.’ She filled Rosie in on the details and hung up.

Now all she needed was a photo of the man.

Valery Kozkov’s funeral was being televised that evening. Stevie knew Henning felt awful about not being in Moscow for it. She felt she should be there too, to pay her respects to Irina and Vadim. But she and Henning had discussed it and decided that what Kozkov would have wanted, over and above the presence of two more warm bodies overlooking his cold one, was the safe return of his little girl.

Stevie had tried to comfort Valery’s friend. After all, funerals, she had reminded him, were for the living, not the dead.

Now she and Henning sat on the end of his bed, waiting for the broadcast to begin. It was to be a state funeral, with all the pomp and ceremony involved, and a mass of important mourners.

‘I wonder if his killers are watching.’
‘Will we ever know who they are?’ Henning was staring blankly at the television screen, now showing a rose-petal-filled advertisement for a luxury hotel chain in Asia.

He turned the volume down and said to Stevie, ‘Even if we find Anya, justice for Valery won’t have been served.
All it will be is damage control—righting one wrong amongst so many.’

Stevie had never seen Henning upset. It stirred her heart and made her want to hold him close. She put her hand on his arm instead.

‘Sometimes that is all we can do, and sometimes that has to be enough. We can’t fix everything that is wrong with the world.’ Stevie had often struggled with the same thoughts herself.

‘Most of the time,’ she went on softly, ‘I can believe that the main thing is to be struggling towards the good, rather than sliding with indifference down the scale towards evil. I cling to that.’

Henning patted her hand but he turned back to the TV and said nothing. Stevie thought she might leave him alone with his thoughts for a moment and stepped into the corridor.

With the tip of her nail, she dialled David Rice and hoped he wouldn’t answer.

‘Stevie.’

He always answered.

‘Where the hell are you? Dovetail told me you were poisoned—’

Trust Dovetail. He had eyes and ears everywhere.

‘—next I hear, Josie tells me you’ve vanished to some sanatorium. What the devil are you playing at?’

‘I’m fine now,’ Stevie tried to soothe the savage beast. ‘Someone slipped a little poison into my coffee. They sugared it to mask the taste but—’

‘You hate sugar in your coffee. Thank God for your fussiness, Stevie Duveen.’

‘By the time I came to, it was too late for the chopper.’

‘There are other ways down the mountain.’ Rice separated each word for emphasis. ‘You think your Russians can’t find you at a sanatorium?’

‘They can find me in London, too. And in Zurich,’ Stevie said quietly, voicing her fears at last.

‘We’ll find a way for you to disappear.’

Stevie looked down at her feet. ‘It wouldn’t work, David, even if I wanted it to. How am I supposed to live in fear for the rest of my life, watching over my shoulder for Russian assassins? Trust me, I wouldn’t be doing this if I thought there was another way out. And then there’s the chance of getting Anya back . . .’

‘Ah. Anya.’

Rice knew the story of Stevie’s parents—and of little Stevie—only too well and he had guessed the impact Kozkov’s assassination might have on her.

‘It’s not the same thing, Stevie.’

‘I know.’

Neither said a word for what seemed like a long time.

Stevie stood in the corridor of the east wing of the sanatorium and stared out of the window. Lights were burning through the small windows in the west wing. Dragoman’s quarters. The windows were too narrow to get a good view, but she saw shapes—people—passing to and fro.

‘You don’t have faith in me, do you, David.’

‘It’s not a matter of faith, Stevie. I promised your mother and father—in that godforsaken mudslide—that I would keep a hand on your shoulder if anything should happen to them.’ There was a pause. David continued, his voice hoarse now. ‘When something did, I tried to keep you safe without crowding you. It’s not been easy, especially not in this line of work. But either you worked for me, where I could keep an eye on you, or you worked for some other firm, where I could not.’

Stevie was touched. He felt the bond, just as she did.

‘I can’t be responsible for losing you, too.’

‘David,’ tears pricked in Stevie’s eyes, ‘what happened to my parents wasn’t your fault. One day I will find the people responsible, count on that, but you are not one of them.’

David coughed. ‘I could say the same to you about Valery Kozkov, about Anya . . . How much difference would that make to how you feel, Stevie? I loved your mother and father. And now I . . .’

The silence of unspoken thoughts buzzed between them, faint static on the line.

Stevie wished Rice would finish his sentence the way her heart wanted him to. Instead, she said, ‘Then let me
make my own decision. Trust me enough, David.’

There was another long pause.

‘Can I do anything from here?’

Stevie’s heart flipped with gratitude. ‘Yes. Rosie’s trying to plant a story on Felix Dragoman for me at the paper—can you make sure it does get in and gets a lot of attention?’

‘Done.’

‘David . . . thank you.’

‘I’ll never forgive you if you get yourself killed.’

He rang off.

Stevie, buoyed by her conversation, pulled out her mini-binoculars. The shapes at Dragoman’s windows were definitely people. She could see the backs of their heads. Was Dragoman among them?

Stevie ran from window to window, trying to see more. Looking down, she saw the massive skylight that hung over what was once the castle courtyard and was now the main room of the sanatorium. It was made of glass panels, two metres by one metre, and held in place by steel frames like a giant patchwork quilt. Two storeys below, she could see the deep chairs, the bunches of lilies, the enormous turquoise curtains that hung to the floor.

Looking up, she saw the crenellations of the four towers against the night sky, opaque with cloud. She needed a photo of Dragoman to go with Rosie’s story and for that, she had to get closer to his windows.

It wouldn’t be much of a photo but she needed it quickly, and she knew from her time spent amongst paparazzi fodder just how much could be done with computers to even the poorest picture.

It seemed there was only one way to approach: over the skylight.

Stevie slipped off her shoes. Nothing would be quieter or safer than bare feet. She opened the narrow window on her side. Three times she tried to fit through that tiny gap, then on the fourth she finally managed to wriggle out, head first. She stretched her hands out. It was freezing in the open air.

The lights from the hall below had obliterated the glass panels in the dark. It took all of Stevie’s faith to trust they were still there.

Slowly and silently she put one foot, then two, on the first glass panel, testing it would hold her weight. Then she stepped to the next. Panel to panel she crept along the freezing glass roof, one tender foot at a time, unable to stop herself looking down onto the small waiter leaning at the tiny bar below, the three Lebanese ladies drinking cocktails.

The skywalk seemed to take forever, but finally Dragoman’s windows drew close. She peered in.

The back of Dragoman’s small head protruded—just—over the back of a velvet armchair. He was watching television, his feet in velvet sandals, crossed delicately at the ankles. His shadow stood to the right of the chair, at least two other men—Stevie noted the neat suits—were in the room, also watching the screen.

It was enormous and Stevie could see it very clearly. It was a news channel televising Kozkov’s funeral in Moscow. It was being held in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, on the banks of the Moskva river, just west of the Kremlin. Gold domes capped the white turrets, almost invisible in the snow.

Stevie started as the faces of Irina and Vadim suddenly appeared, almost life-size on the screen. They looked so ghostly and alone, and Stevie’s heart went out to them. Masha Osipova stood by Irina, an arm around the widow, her eyes red from crying.

The ticker tape at the bottom of the screen gave the bulletin as the camera swung slowly and showed the room. Irina and Vadim were walking with other mourners in a procession, down the marble aisle, towards the coffin. Pale faces like almonds in a sea of black dotted the cathedral. Stevie couldn’t hear the music through the window but the silent spectacle was moving enough.

Generals in their full medallion stood, breasts out like tanks, along the aisle. Even the president was there, his fish-lids unblinking, perpetually outlined in red. Everyone looked very sorry, very sombre, very fitting. They would all be expressing their condolences to the widow and her son, saying the right things, and none of it would change a thing.

Stevie thought of something Vadim had told her after Kozkov had left the dacha.

‘He has no real friends,’ he’d said. ‘People feel it’s too dangerous for them to be close to my father.’

Stevie, out on the roof, wondered which of the faces wore only the mask of grief and regret . . . perhaps Kozkov’s
enemies were amongst the mourners. In fact, it was more than likely.

As one of the generals stood at the microphone, speaking gravely to the mourners, Stevie thought of Juvenal: _Who guards the guards?_

The camera panned the retinue around the president, moving from face to face. The figures painted on the gilded walls seemed to also be watching the spectacle. Suddenly Dragoman pointed to someone on the screen, saying something to the men in the room.

Stevie looked at the face that had excited him. She did not recognise it. Indeed, it was a most unremarkable face, one that would slide through your memory without leaving a trace. Perhaps you might remember the eyes, dark—almost black—and cold as the bottom of a well.

It would be too convenient, unfortunately, to assume that Dragoman had just pointed out his accomplice in the Kremlin in an act of *j'accuse*. He might have, but there would certainly be others, and it did not help Stevie or Anya’s immediate situation. All she could deduce was that Dragoman recognised the faceless man.

**Who was he?**

Dragoman and his men were discussing something avidly. Stevie pulled out her tiny telephone and readied the camera lens. She wished he would turn his head a little more towards her. Perhaps if she moved a little to one side and—

Stevie stifled a yelp. Dragoman’s face had materialised at the window. Had she been seen?

But Dragoman appeared to be staring into nothing, thinking. It was dark on the roof and the lights inside ought to make her invisible.

Stevie cautiously raised her phone and took a photo. She sent it straight to Rosie on Fleet Street. Glancing quickly back up at the window, she saw to her horror that the face of the shadow had replaced Dragoman’s. He seemed to be staring right at her.

Stevie quickly turned and began to creep back the way she had come.

Suddenly there was a quick burst of gunfire. The shadow had smashed the double glazing with a round from his Kalashnikov and was now standing, silhouetted in the window frame, a terminator with a smoking gun.

Stevie began to run.

Another burst of gunfire. The panel on her right shattered under the rain of bullets. Stevie gasped and kept running, her feet numb from the cold. The panel right behind her shattered—then another one, this time on her right. She dodged right again, her back foot leaving the panel just as she felt it give way.

Twice she stumbled, almost sprawling across the roof. The wall of the east wing was near, the window still open. But Stevie remembered how difficult it had been to crawl out. Getting in would take too long. She would be a sitting duck.

A rain of bullets shattered the panels closest to the east wall, blocking her way to the window anyway. Stevie stood still for a second and took one quick, deep breath. This was no time to panic, suspended on a glass pane, surrounded by air.

Then she saw the curtains below her. They were heavy velvet and lined against the cold. The rods holding them would have to be very strong.

Holding onto the bare metal roofing frame with both hands, she swung herself down until she was hanging, like a child from monkey bars, by her arms. She began to swing gently, grateful for years of compulsory school gymnastic classes, then launched herself at the nearest curtain like a cat with its claws extended.

More gunfire and a rain of glass. Hugging the blue velvet as if it were a large teddy bear, Stevie slid to the floor, six metres below.

The staff and guests had fled the room at the first shower of glass. Stevie could hear shouting, people were coming. No doubt Dragoman’s men would be amongst them.

Quick as a bird, Stevie ran over to the corner bar and grabbed an empty bottle of champagne that had been left sitting on the counter. She leapt into the nearest armchair and slumped over with her eyes closed, the bottle hanging from her right hand.

The room filled with voices—Swiss-German, Russian, Lebanese, Stevie recognised the perfect French of the elderly lady in pearls—all demanding to know what had happened.

A gentle hand shook her shoulder.

‘**Fräulein Duveen? Fräulein Duveen?**’
It was the manager, Gunnar Gobb. ‘Are you hurt?’
Then he caught sight of the empty bottle. Fräulein Duveen had obviously passed out drunk and missed the whole commotion. So much the better.

‘Fräulein Duveen, we must get you to your room. Where is—?’
As if called, Henning appeared. He caught one look at his client and groaned.
‘Oh, Herr Direktor, she told me she was having a late massage!
Really—how can this have happened?’
‘She must have taken the bottle from the bar,’ Gunnar Gobb said disapprovingly. ‘The barman would never serve alcohol to a green bracelet.’
‘The demon drink. Please,’ Henning placed a hand on the manager’s shoulder, ‘let’s keep this incident between the two of us. It is very important no one knows she was here. Her reputation, you see . . . word gets around. Can you promise me that?’

Gunnar Gobb smiled magnanimously and assured Henning discretion was his watchword. He left to tend to the hysteria of the other guests.

Henning knelt beside Stevie. Red streaks of blood had seeped unnoticed through the fingers of Stevie’s right hand and were now dripping onto the carpet.

Henning gently unclenched her fingers and put the bottle on the floor.

‘My God, Stevie, what have you done?’ His voice was low and full of concern. He examined her hand, wiping the blood carefully with a clean handkerchief. ‘I thought you had just gone to look through the windows,’ he whispered.
‘Next thing I know, the roof is falling.’

Stevie opened her eyes and smiled. ‘You mean I brought the house down?’
‘Not very funny,’ but Henning almost smiled. ‘You’ve cut your wrist and palm. I think you need a stitch or two.’
Stevie sat up in alarm. ‘Oh no—I’m sure it’s nothing, just a small graze. See?’ The wound on her palm throbbed and disgorged a small gush of blood that ran quickly down Stevie’s arm.
‘Nothing at all,’ Henning wrapped the handkerchief tightly around her hand. He glanced quickly around. Men with guns had arrived, but it seemed everyone in the room was looking up at the roof.

He took the champagne bottle by the neck and deftly smashed it on the edge of the table. The neck broke off. He cursed aloud.

‘You’re a danger to yourself, Stevie. Come on!’ He scooped her up in his arms like a child and called for the manager.

‘We need a doctor here! She’s managed to cut herself on the champagne bottle.’ Henning held her up for the manager to see. ‘She’s bleeding. We need stitches.’

As the medics rushed Stevie away, Henning called after them.

‘And no scarring—we can’t have scarring. She’s a celebrity.’

Later, freshly bathed and stitched, Stevie was sitting in her room, feet curled under her, cozy in a fresh bathrobe and holding a glass of medicinal whisky. Henning was sitting on the corner of the bed in a red poloneck jumper of fine cashmere that not many men, Stevie thought, could have got away with.

‘What were you thinking, Stevie? You were almost killed—in quite a few ways.’

‘I needed to get a photo for Rosie’s story. It seemed like the obvious way was over the roof. From there, things, well, took on a life of their own.’ She sipped her whisky. ‘Looking back though, I am rather pleased with the grand finale, the slithering down the curtains. I think that was quite Errol Flynn of me.’

Stevie saw from Henning’s face he was not in the mood for her flights of fancy.

‘They were watching Kozkov’s funeral on television.’ Her voice now serious, Stevie told Henning what had happened.

His brow furrowed with concern. ‘Did the man at the window see your face? Will they guess it was you out there?’

Stevie shook her head. ‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. I don’t think I could have been more than a dark shape.’

‘The man would be a well-trained killer. The fact that he missed hitting you each time he fired probably means you were, mercifully, almost impossible to see. And there’s not much of you at that.’
Stevie nodded. ‘That was always my greatest advantage when I was fencing. My opponents used to complain that, by the time I had turned side on, there was nothing left to hit.’ Stevie smiled. ‘I think that’s the only reason I always seemed to make the team.’

Henning stared at her. ‘Let’s hope you were as invisible as you think . . . but in our favour, this might make Dragoman more certain that someone from the Kremlin is out to kill him.’

Stevie thought for a moment. ‘I only wish I could have heard what they were saying. What did you think of the funeral?’

‘He would have hated it. The hypocrisy of all those who wanted him gone shedding crocodile tears.’

‘Did you notice the men with the president? One of them caught Dragoman’s attention.’

Henning shook his head and reached for the television remote.

‘With these twenty-four-hour news channels, the footage is sure to be repeated.’

They kept the television on in the background in case and rang the sanatorium dining room for some supper. Things in the kitchen were running like cuckoo clockwork, despite the bullets and the collapse of the roof. Henning ordered a Café de Paris steak with pommes frites; for Fräulein Duveen, the chef would prepare sustenance in accordance with the green menu.

When pressed, the kitchen staff revealed that the green menu tonight consisted of a large bowl of blood soup. For dessert there was a bitter beetroot and bran pudding, steamed, then peppered with candied peel. Stevie was not amused.

‘Sounds delightful.’ Henning had cheered up considerably at the idea of Stevie being faced with blood soup. ‘Oh, and you had better make that two sides of frites—I’m rather hungry.’ He hung up and grinned at Stevie.

‘I can’t wait, can you?’

‘Dreadful man.’

Henning shook his head at her. ‘I risked quite a lot ordering you contraband frites.’

‘You only ordered extra because you knew I would eat yours if you didn’t.’

The funeral began to replay on the television screen as they sat down to eat. The camera panned the room and Stevie pointed: ‘Him.’

Henning paused in thought before turning to Stevie. ‘Nikita Romanovitch Orlikov.’

Stevie stopped, the silver soup dome in mid air. Her blood chilled.

‘Is that what he looks like?’ she whispered. ‘I could never find a picture.’

‘He never lets himself be photographed. I’m surprised he is on camera at the funeral.’

Nikita Orlikov was the ex-head of the FSB, the Russian security service. He had been in the KGB at the same time as the current president, during the Cold War days, and had acquired a fearsome reputation as an utterly cold, utterly ruthless man. The service had trained him well. No one knew exactly what his official role was now, but he was certainly still active as an advisor to the new head of the FSB, as well as the president.

‘Well,’ she said finally, ‘Dragoman obviously recognised him, not that that means much—you recognised him, too.’ She took a large sip of her whisky and looked at Henning. ‘It is a terrifying thought, isn’t it? The two of them in cahoots of any kind.’

‘Quite,’ he agreed. ‘I suppose Orlikov would know about the links between Dragoman and the siloviki; Orlikov may even be one of them.’

‘It’s frighteningly likely. He could have had Kozkov killed in a heartbeat—that list would be motive enough.’

Stevie pushed her soup aside and ran her good hand through her hair. ‘The new FSB remit seems to include consolidation and protection of political and economic power in the hands of the current government. Your friend Maxim Krutchick believes the spike in high-profile assassinations make it likely they are using more extreme tactics to get what they want.’

Henning nodded. ‘And Dragoman might now be getting nervous that he has become a loose end to be tied.’

‘Mmm,’ Stevie said, ‘exactly,’ and began eating Henning’s fried potatoes one at a time with a silver dessert fork. ‘It would explain why he got so angry when Orlikov’s face appeared on screen.’ She looked up. ‘The thing these potatoes really need is—’

Henning already had a bottle of champagne in his hand.

‘Mind reader.’ Stevie grinned as the cork popped softly.
Anya had stopped caring where she was, some castle, some mansion, some place, still unfound. She had also stopped eating and she was growing thinner. It was as if, subconsciously, she were trying to leave her imprisoned body and, light as air, fly back home. She lived hour by hour, thanking God for Ludmilla and Dasha.

Largely, the three girls had been ignored. But something had changed in the last few days and their captors had become tense, on edge, furious at the slightest thing. It was terrifying.

Ludmilla kept saying they were going to be killed. Anya found her brain couldn’t really process the idea of being killed. She couldn’t imagine it. All she knew was life, and bad as it was right now, she couldn’t imagine it ending.

The girls were kept in a small room with a tiny window that showed them only sky. One day, Dasha spotted an eagle and they had taken turns looking at it, soaring on invisible air currents way up high. That had been a good day.

Whenever the girls heard voices, they stopped talking and Anya put her ear to the door. She had the acute hearing of a trained musician and it was her job to listen to see what she could learn. It was never much, but when the voices were raised, it was easier.

Like the other night, when the man had got so angry and the atmosphere had become as brittle as glass. The guard who had brought them food had been vicious, stepping on Dasha’s hand on purpose. When she had cried out, he’d sneered and said, ‘Soon there’ll be a lot more than that to cry about, my little doll.’

After that, Ludmilla had started talking about death again, but then the voices had grown louder and Anya had shushed her.

‘—will not have that bastard . . . see what I can do. He mistakes me for someone he can . . . it’s a very bad mistake! . . . Alexei!’

Anya crept even closer to the door, her ear to the crack between it and the floor, a mouse.

‘. . . tonight . . . take the Kozkov girl . . . but the other two will . . .’

Damn! Anya could hear just enough to torture herself; not enough to know anything. Only that her captors’ leader was very angry, and that something was about to happen to them tonight—to her, and to Dasha and Ludmilla, separately.

Anya decided then that there could be things worse than death.

Stevie awoke early the next morning and, for a short moment, forgot completely where she was and what had happened the night before. Everything came flooding back in a rush, along with the throbbing in her hand, and she groaned.

Sometimes she wished her life was simpler, more honest, more morally certain; that she was growing vegetables and flowers in a sheltered garden by the sea, and raising chickens and children—did she really say children?

What would it be like to have children with Henning?

The thought hadn’t even been completed when she returned it quick-time to the ether and sat up, throwing back the duvet.

Ridiculous.

She found her slippers and shuffled to the bathroom. Every muscle in her body ached. She felt a hundred years old.

She was soaking her muscles in the bath, her mind racing over possible connections between Dragoman and Nikita ‘the killer’ Orlikov, when the musical notes of the PA sounded.

‘Guten Morgen, meine Damen und Herren. Some of you will no doubt have heard a little commotion yesterday evening. I can assure you all, liebe Gäste, that there is no cause for alarm.’ Gunnar Gobb’s dulcet tones went on to describe a flock of rare owls that had flown into the glass roof, causing some damage. He then thanked Mr Felix Dragoman for sparing his manpower in hunting for any owls that may be lying injured and in need of help.

The bathroom phone rang. Stevie hoped you couldn’t get electrocuted using the phone in the bath.

‘A flock of owls?!’ Henning was not impressed by the deception.

‘Owls are singularly individual creatures, they do not “flock”. And when they do chose to convene, their grouping is called a “parliament of owls”.’

He seemed to take it as a personal affront. Stevie thought of the owl on his forearm. Perhaps there was more
behind his outrage than irritation at ornithological inaccuracy.

‘Anyway,’ he went on, ‘you should look out of as many windows as you can.’

Stevie groaned again and pulled herself out of her bath, feeling only ninety-eight years old.

On the wooded hillsides above the gorge, and amongst the rocks surrounding the sanatorium, she could see men in boots bashing about.

Dragoman’s muscle were back out there, in three times the numbers, presumably looking for the shape at the window.

Crossing the breakfast room a short time later, wearing large black sunglasses, jodhpurs, with an oversized V-neck jumper in tartan cashmere, and her bathrobe thrown over her shoulders like a cape, Stevie nodded to each table of guests. The looks of more than polite interest and the furtive glances to her bandaged hand told Stevie that not even the discretion of the Swiss can stand up to the gossip of small hotels.

_Guten Morgen, bonjour, Madame, Mesdames, good morning_ . . .

Stevie greeted each with an air of sheepishness appropriate for one who had drunk herself into a forbidden stupor the night before, then rather publicly injured herself. Some were no doubt wondering if the cuts were truly an accident, or surface marks of dark intention.

Raw mushroom and beetroot porridge was on the green menu. This was getting too much. Stevie needed her strength and she needed food.

Up to the buffet she marched and helped herself to three soft-boiled eggs, lying defenceless in a straw basket, a huge chunk of heavy walnut bread and butter and the entire piece of Emmenthal cheese on the cheese board. Before any of the dining-room supervisors could protest, Stevie had swiped a hot pot of coffee from the farm-faced Germans and was back at her table.

Food had never tasted so good and she ate, trying not to gobble, everything on the plate, except for—

‘I would leave the floral arrangement, Stevie. Rhododendrons are poisonous.’

Henning, of course.

‘I wasn’t going to eat the rhododendron. I’ve had quite enough, thank you.’

‘So I see.’ Empty eggshells, cheese rind, and a smear of butter and crumbs was all that was left of her feast. Henning raised an amused eyebrow. ‘Does Gunnar Gobb know about this?’

‘Oh look, I’m a television star. If I can’t have a tantrum every now and then, no one can.’

‘Spoken like the real thing.’ Henning sat and ordered a double espresso from the disapproving waiter who hovered, uncertain what to do about the rogue feeding.

When he had gone, Stevie leaned in and whispered, ‘The good thing about people suspecting you tried to kill yourself is that they’re too afraid to approach you. “Don’t speak to her, lest she snap and try again! On your head may it be.” ’

Henning laughed and produced a major English newspaper from under his arm. It had that day’s date on it. He held the paper out to Stevie.

_KILLER OF CENTRAL BANK HEAD FOUND_, screamed the headline. And there it was, on the front page, a photo of Felix Dragoman. It had been cropped close and digitally enhanced, but it was Stevie’s photo. Rosie and David had come good.

Stevie skimmed the story, checking for the key information: _Valery Kozkov . . . assassinated . . . anonymous Kremlin source . . . will not tolerate . . . Felix Dragoman, the most wanted man . . . operate with impunity . . . brought to justice_ . . .

She looked at Henning with satisfaction. ‘It’s perfect.’

‘Dragoman’s going to have a fit when he sees that—obviously your intention.’ Henning tapped the headline with his forefinger. ‘Just further “proof” that his friends and sometimes protectors in power have turned on him. He will read between the lines and guess his life is in danger.’

Stevie caught sight of Gunnar Gobb scurrying out towards the hotel entrance. He didn’t look his usual, imperturbable self.

‘Shall we take some air, Henning? I’m feeling rather grey.’

The air outside was still and icy cold. Stevie and Henning wandered out towards the woods and the cluster of Dragoman’s men that had formed to one side of the road. The manager was with them, looking terribly pale.
‘Goooten morrigen, Herr Gobb,’ sang out Stevie with a wave, her robe trailing in the snow. ‘What’s going on? Outdoor breakfast cocktails? Tremendous idea!’

The manager came towards her, agitated. ‘Bitte, Fräulein, please, go back inside at once.’

A man lay on the ground surrounded by the boots of the search parties.

Stevie caught sight of Dragoman. He had appeared from nowhere and was now standing over the body. He was dressed all in black: trousers, stack-heeled boots and a three-quarter-length coat with a Mao collar. He wore a high-necked white shirt with a black cravat, gold sunglasses and fingerless leather gloves.

One of his men knelt in the snow. She saw him lift a hand belonging to the body, check for a pulse, then drop it.

‘Dead,’ he pronounced. Then he began searching the dead man’s pockets, pulled out a large hunting knife and handed it to Dragoman carefully by the blade. His shadow stepped in to take it before his master’s hands had to touch it.

Stevie craned her head to get a better look; it had an insignia on the handle: a black bat set on a blue globe of the earth. It was familiar but Stevie couldn’t place it.

Dragoman obviously could. He turned pale, then two red spots of rage began to burn on his cheeks.

Henning put an arm around Stevie and pulled her away.

‘You’re too delicate for this, Stevie. Think of your health, your fans, darling.’

‘I just want to see what—’

One of Dragoman’s men stepped menacingly forward brandishing a Kalashnikov. Dragoman raised his little finger, the ruby ring glowing like an eye, and the man stopped. The arch villain’s eyes stayed hard on Stevie and it was all she could do to keep her expression moulded into one of slightly bovine curiosity. He made her feel suddenly frightened, chilled inside.

The manager hurried to smooth things over. ‘There has been a terrible accident, Fräulein Duveen—a climber.’

The Swiss really were bad liars, thought Stevie.

‘Oh dear,’ she whispered. ‘Is he dead? You know I once played a sexy forensics person in a TV series. They dyed my hair red. Maybe I can help, you know, time of death . . .’

She knelt quickly on the snow.

The dead man wore a long leather overcoat and only one muddy black boot. No one climbed in a leather overcoat.

Stevie examined his face. Even without the goggles she recognised him immediately: the langlauf er from St Moritz, the Russian with the rifle who had been hunting her on the ski slope.

You didn’t forget the face of a man who had been sent to kill you.

He was freshly dead, his head drooping at an odd angle and the bruise on the neck suggesting some violent pressure had snapped it. Dragoman’s men would have known better than to fire a shot.

The man with the Kalashnikov shouted at Gunnar Gobb in Russian and he began to physically usher Stevie away, a hand gripping her upper arm.

‘Please, Fräulein Duveen, this is no place for a woman in your condition.’

Stevie allowed herself to be led away, stumbling slightly from the shock.

‘How awful.’ She held a pale hand to her mouth. ‘How terribly, terribly awful. I’ve never seen a real dead body before . . .’

Henning thanked the manager and took over the ushering, cooing, ‘There, there, darling. He’s only unconscious, only sleeping, darling.’

To keep up appearances, Stevie and Henning had gone down to the steaming Hadean swimming pool and swum a good few laps. Lunch had been an uninspiring affair, some kind of vegetable timbale soaked with filthy vinegar, and a bran mousse. They were now back in Stevie’s room.

‘I’m almost looking forward to this birthday dinner for the food alone,’ Stevie said. ‘Do you think they will serve steak? Or maybe venison, with a little red cabbage—oh and what if they had foie gras with small brioche toasts?’

Henning raised his maddening eyebrow at her and she scowled in reply. ‘Well, you don’t know what it’s like being on this diet of stable muck.’

Stevie lit a cigarette and sipped her mud root tea. ‘Henning, I feel quite awful.’

‘I could smuggle you some pain au chocolat if you like . . .’
‘Oh, yes please. But I don’t mean that. I mean, I got that man killed today.’
‘That man was an assassin, Stevie. He was trying to kill you, remember?’
‘Yes, but he didn’t succeed. I did.’
‘Would you have wanted it the other way around?’ Henning asked quietly.

Stevie stared out at the black-and-white pines, the deep black trench, that lay just outside the window. Backlit by the cold light, the smoke from her cigarette formed tendrils of thought around her head.

If one Russian assassin really had followed their tracks from St Moritz and been stalking the castle, then there could be others. Either way, it was prudent to assume that he would have made contact with his controllers back in Moscow before being killed. Surely Dragoman would assume the same thing . . .

‘So, how do we play it tonight?’ Henning was dressing, buttoning his shirt closed over his rather perfect chest.
‘Will Dragoman still show for the birthday dinner?’

Stevie looked quickly away from the chest and back to the pines. She nodded. ‘My guess is yes. He won’t let a killer in the woods put a spoke in his wheel. He seems to have that curious dictatorial mix of arrogance and paranoia, all wrapped up in one evil little package.’

She turned back to Henning, a silhouette. ‘Tonight, we improvise. We get close to Dragoman, we see what we can find out. Is Anya here somewhere? The sanatorium’s massive and there are any number of places he could hide a girl. Especially since he has a controlling interest in the place.’

‘Short of breaking into his rooms, we could start combing the place, but that could take forever.’ Henning affixed his cufflinks. ‘And there’s no guarantee we’ll find her.’

‘Something tells me in my bird bones that we don’t have a lot of time.’ Stevie bit her lip nervously. ‘I’m frightened for Anya, Henning. Really frightened.’

Henning held her gaze a moment then reached out to put his hand over hers.

Stevie got to her feet and rallied herself. ‘Where are my ballet shoes? You never did tell me what happened to them.’ She went to fossick for clothes. ‘Why is the toe all singed?’

‘Never mind that,’ he replied quickly. ‘We’re going to be late to the axe murderer’s ball if we don’t get a move on.’

Stevie emerged from the cupboard. ‘Well, what do you think?’

Henning stopped, then smiled.

Over her leather trousers, Stevie had pulled on a low-cut black V-neck and a gilet of brilliant green feathers. They shone in the low light with flecks of gold. Her eyes were lined with indigo, her face as pale as ever. The knife was hidden, as usual, on the inside of her calf.

‘I think you look simply glorious, Stevie, like the world’s most exotic bird.’
She actually blushed. ‘Well, let’s get going—you look very smart by the way.’

Henning grunted. His velvet smoking jacket was ancient—it had belonged to his grandfather—but in the darker light of evening he hoped no one would notice the small moth hole on the sleeve. Underneath, his cream silk shirt was as soft as milk.

Together, arm in arm, they made their way to the ballroom.

Although it was called the ballroom, it was unlikely the room had seen any dances for the last fifty years—certainly not since frivolity had become unfashionable in health resorts. It was, however, vast, with walls and a ceiling of intricately carved chestnut. A massive chandelier, lit up with real candles, hung from a wooden rose.

In the centre of the room, directly below the chandelier, there was a round table covered in a white tablecloth that fell to the floor. It was set with crystal glasses for water, wine and champagne, and the plates were printed with small butterflies and rimmed with gold. Stevie was pleased to note the amount of cutlery—all gold—hoping it indicated many courses and copious amounts of food.

The guests stood to the right of the table in a group, drinking champagne and looking a little uncomfortable. Indeed, the ballroom was made for three hundred and they would have been a party of only twenty.

Stevie paused a moment and took stock of the group. The coarse-boned Germans were there, all four of them, looking placid and immutable in evening wear built for comfort rather than elegance; the three women from Lebanon had turned up wearing what had to be the entire contents of their jewellery boxes and incredibly high heels. They had obviously spent the afternoon in the Sonnenbad as they were an even darker shade of tan—almost leather
by candlelight.

There was the French _grande dame_ in her reams of pearls, standing a little to one side and looking rather sour. She was obviously trying to avoid being dragged into the ponderous and no doubt well-meaning conversational orbit of the Germans to her left.

Gunnar Gobb was there, looking as spruce as new pine. He headed towards the _grande dame_, conversation ready, the template of politeness and cleanliness.

Heini and his group stood at the centre of the guests. He had managed to collect four women in tight satin playsuits—crimson, yellow, indigo and green—and matching coloured heels. Heini had obviously treated them to a little facial pick-me-up that day as all four had swollen, slightly inflamed-looking lips, and none seemed able to show any expression whatsoever on their painted faces.

Stevie watched, fascinated, as they laughed at Heini’s stories: their puffy mouths formed little O’s of hilarity and they chuffed, making little ‘hoo hoo’ noises. They looked, Stevie thought, like finger puppets.

Heini’s bodyguards were lined up along the wall, and his three pugs roamed amongst the guests wearing diamond necklaces intended for necks slimmer and far less hairy than theirs.

Then Stevie’s roving eye caught sight of Dragoman. He was standing slightly to one side, a cigarette smoking in his ebony holder, his hair immaculately combed back off his forehead. The crescent moon stood out like a perfect sideways smile. His shadow hovered to his left.

He was wearing a dinner suit in which no other man in the world would have been able to look menacing. Perfectly cut, sharp as a blade, it was the colour of congealing blood. A cream silk scarf floated over his shoulders like a shroud.

Stevie watched as a proud pug snuffled towards his handmade leather shoes. Without so much as a blink, Dragoman snapped his heel upwards and caught the poor animal in the jaw. Heini’s laughter across the room drowned out the yelp as the creature scuttled back to find his master, curly tail low between his legs.

There was a woman with Dragoman. This was unexpected. Josie had told her he was not interested in women—or men.

The woman had her back towards Stevie. She was of medium height—taller in fact than Dragoman—and very slight. Her blonde hair was swept into a perfect chignon and she was wearing a black velvet dress that scooped low on her back and exposed her delicate spine.

Stevie glanced at the woman’s feet. She was wearing black suede heels covered in gold stars. The shoes were rather beautiful, but they were too big. Much too big. It was as if a little girl had slipped on her mother’s shoes for fun.

Stevie threaded her arm through Henning’s and made her way towards Dragoman.

‘Good evening, Mr Dragoman.’ Henning smiled but kept his hand in his pocket.

The woman turned to face them.

Stevie almost gasped out loud.

‘Hello, I’m Stevie Duveen,’ she said in her absolute best Hollywood starlet voice. ‘I simply adore your shoes! I noticed them from all the way over there—just so glam-rock fabulous. Did you get them here in Switzerland?’

Anya seemed deeply confused by this. She looked again to Henning and opened her mouth. Dragoman was watching—Stevie could feel his eyes. She dived in once more with her silly, high-pitched chatter.

‘And who does your hair? You’ve totally channelled Princess Grace of Monaco—it’s divine. I’d love that look for
the Oscars next year.’

Henning caught Anya’s eye and gave an imperceptible shake of his head. Dragoman put an arm around her waist and pulled her towards him.

‘My niece is very shy. She doesn’t take easily to strangers.’

Anya looked back at Stevie, who smiled even harder with her mouth but tried to tell Anya, with every ounce of expression in her eyes, that she and Henning had come to rescue her.

A gong was struck and the guests began to make their way to the table. There was a careful placement. Anya was sandwiched between Dragoman and Heini; Stevie was sitting opposite Heini—too far away to talk to Anya over the round table—but able to watch her through the obstacles of candle holders, glassware and flowers. She wondered at the arrogance of Felix Dragoman, able to bring his captive down to dine amongst the hotel guests, so sure was he of his control over her.

Then Stevie understood. Anya had become more than a hostage to him. She had become a symbol of something that Dragoman enjoyed being reminded of: his power.

What could Anya do in this situation? Even if she ran to the florid Germans, say, and begged for help, the shadow would be upon her before she could even begin to tell her story, or explain who she was. Dragoman would no doubt appear at her side, apologising profusely for not having chaperoned Anya’s champagne intake.

‘My niece is easily excited—she is not used to wine. I’m afraid I have not been watching her closely enough.’ Stevie could almost hear him. And everyone would smile, and Anya would be whisked back upstairs.

Poor girl, thought Stevie in horror. We are never more trapped than when the illusion of freedom is there. Chains could not have bound Anya more cruelly.

Henning sat to Stevie’s right, deep in conversation with the grande dame. They were, Stevie could overhear, on the subject of Persian water gardens. Gardens were a good choice of topic with anyone over a certain age and translated well into any language, including, it seemed, disdainful French.

On Stevie’s left, one of the florid Germans began a series of comments on the strategic role of tanks on the modern battlefield. It was actually a subject Stevie was very interested in and she held firm views on the matter. Tonight, however, her cover story (starlet wastrel) meant she had to feign extreme disinterest. In any case, the presence of Anya was too distracting to allow for any proper conversation.

The girl’s eyes in the candlelight were hunted and hollow and Stevie saw her glance at Henning more than once, but he never looked in her direction. The confusion on her face at this broke Stevie’s heart, but she could do nothing. Sending any kind of message to her now would just be too dangerous.

Dinner was an interminable procession of dishes produced by a fancy hat with an indeterminate number of culinary stars. The chef had embraced the newest—and, in Stevie’s opinion, most unfortunate—gastronomical trend: transforming the texture of food until it is unrecognisable as what it once was.

First, and with much fanfare, came what looked like a tiny risotto but was discovered to be, after a single gold forkful, a foam of soya bean roots and oysters. The next course was a small red cube on a large white plate. This was apparently all that was left of an entire filet mignon, reduced and in some unutterably awful way transformed into—Stevie touched it for confirmation—jelly. It was a travesty, oysters and filet mignon zapped, their molecules rearranged to end up in small, slimy bites that taunted the palate with memories of their original selves.

Dragoman seemed to be delighting in every mouthful—as much as such a retentive and joyless man can delight—carefully dabbing the corners of his mouth after every bite in the most irritating way.

Heini was roaring with laughter at every new dish and drinking enormous amounts of the very fine wines served with each one. He ate every course in a single bite and thought this was tremendously funny. His gaggle of candy-coloured cheerleaders thought so, too.

He was very pleased when Dragoman, growing visibly annoyed by the laughter, was able to tell him just how much he was paying the chef to produce the meal. Heini did a quick calculation of dollars per dish and was thrilled: at those prices he must indeed be eating the finest food in the world.

Anya ate nothing and stared down at her plate. Stevie glanced around at the other guests. No one was paying her any attention. She saw two of the glittering Lebanese women give Anya a quick up-and-down, sour expressions on their faces.

Stevie watched as one mouthed to the other, ‘Skinny bitch.’ It was envy. She would have loved to turn to the women and explain that Anya was thin because she was living in terror every second of her day and night. Was that something to envy?
The fifth course—or was it the sixth?—arrived, a glass bell filled with smoke. Stevie, still starving at this point, turned to Henning in disbelief. He simply smiled at her.

‘Bon appetit.’

She lifted the bell and the swirling smoke wafted out, revealing a small piece of white fish.

‘It’s fugu fish,’ she heard Dragoman tell Heini. ‘It’s deadly unless it is properly prepared.’

Heini found this even more hilarious—the wine no doubt was helping—that he was paying huge amounts to eat something that could kill him.

Stevie poked it with her fork. At least it felt like fish. Hungry as she was, she let it pass untasted.

After the final dish, a terrifying mousse of some kind, Dragoman stood and made a little birthday speech, joyless and dry as cardboard.

‘Your associates in Zlatoust send you many happy returns.’ Dragoman could have been announcing the train timetable. ‘They have organised to surprise you with a cake.’

From somewhere came the theme tune from Apocalypse Now—actually Wagner’s Ride of the Valkyries before it became famous in the Vietnam epic. Heini stood and clapped the cake as it entered on the shoulders of a waiter.

It was the vilest thing Stevie had ever seen. The top of the cake had been printed with a photo of Heini’s face, three times its real size. All four edges of the huge cream rectangle were crowded with candles. It was carefully placed on a separate stand for admiration. Heini was beaming.

Waiters carrying bottles of Cristal emerged and began filling the champagne flutes on the table.

Stevie leaned in towards Henning. ‘Well, at least their choice of champagne is appropriate.’

‘I thought it was more the favourite of rap music stars . . .’ Henning thought for a moment. ‘I’m sure it was the managing director of Roederer who, when asked if its popularity with rappers would ruin the image of the marque, replied, “But what can we do? We can’t forbid people from buying it.”’

Stevie nodded. ‘I remember that—and they don’t rap about Cristal anymore. But it was first made in 1876 for Alexander II of Russia. He was so terrified of being assassinated that he ordered champagne be made in clear bottles rather than the usual dark green ones so that no one could hide a bomb in them. Kind of appropriate for our paranoid friend.’

Heini went over to admire the cake, followed by his confetti of women. The other guests crowded around; the head waiter handed Heini a knife.

‘Oh goody,’ Stevie whispered to Henning. ‘We’re going to cut him up.’

The cake was cut up and handed around to the guests. Stevie accepted a plate. She looked for Anya, flanked by Dragoman and his shadow, and crept her way through the guests until she was standing close to her, a glass of champagne in one hand, a piece of Heini’s ear in the other. Stevie had to let Anya know she was a friend. If any opportunity came to run, she couldn’t risk a delay. Anya had to trust her.

She could hardly whisper anything to her. She would be seen and it would immediately arouse suspicion. Handing Anya a piece of paper—anything in writing—would be simply foolish. For now, all she could do was stand close to her.

Stevie looked at the cake. The bottom half of Heini’s face had gone; the brown eyes, with their dull marzipan stare, remained untouched. She saw Heini turn to Dragoman.

‘It’s quite an extraordinary likeness, don’t you think?’ The birthday boy beamed with delight. ‘It’s so good it’s almost a shame to eat it.’

‘It quite takes the breath away,’ Dragoman replied, refusing the proffered slice. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

Heini took this as a compliment. ‘By the way, did you see the English newspaper this morning?’ He tried to clap a paw on Dragoman’s shoulder but the man moved away. ‘It’s quite a good photo I think. It seems, heh, that your friends in Moscow have decided to hang Kozkov’s death shroud around your shoulders.’

Stevie glanced at Anya. Did she know? Her face was blank but a single, fat tear fell from her left eye. Stevie guessed she already knew.

‘I already told you,’ Dragoman hissed with impatience. ‘I had nothing to do with that matter.’

‘Doesn’t really matter if you did or not, does it? The wolves are out to get you, my friend, heh, the pack has turned on one of its own.’ Heini licked the cream off the side of his slice of cake with a lizardy tongue. ‘I think I might have to ask for my payment up front, heh.’
‘They wouldn’t dare to touch me.’ Dragoman’s eyes were like marbles.
Heini shrugged. ‘Looks like they have already given the order.’

‘Then,’ Dragoman’s voice was tight and malevolent, ‘it’s a decision they won’t live to regret.’
Heini wiped his mouth with his hand. ‘So, heh, where is the gift you promised me?’

Stevie’s mind was reeling. The bait had been swallowed—Rosie was a genius. She sipped her champagne and pretended to be listening to Gunnar Gobb explain the details of the week’s langlauf expedition to florid German number three.

She saw Dragoman pull Anya closer towards him and turn her shoulders to face Heini.

‘For you.’
Heini looked the girl up and down. ‘Sure, heh. I’ll take it. But honestly, I think I prefer my sparkling parrots here.’
He indicated his bevy of women, now giggling around the cake, dipping their fingers in the whipped cream and touching them to each other’s noses. ‘So marvellously playful, don’t you think?’

Dragoman’s marbles shone with an evil light. ‘But you don’t know who she is.’
Heini raised an eyebrow.
Dragoman spoke softly, but Stevie was close enough. ‘She’s Valery Kozkov’s daughter.’
For a moment Heini was lost for words. Then a smile crept across his face.

‘Heh. Heh. You are a poet my friend, heh, a true poet.’

Dragoman gave Anya a small shove in the back. She took a step forward. Heini took her by the hand and ever so gently drew her towards him, admiring every inch of her.

‘Kozkov’s daughter, heh?’

It took all of Stevie’s willpower to not leap forward, smash Heini in the face and rush for the doors with Anya.
She told herself Anya would be easier to rescue in Heini’s hands. Heini’s bodyguards were thugs, hired for their bulk rather than their brain; Dragoman’s were smart, sophisticated killers.

Dragoman’s shadow stepped forward and handed his master a clean white handkerchief, pouring rubbing alcohol onto his hands. Having thoroughly disinfected them, Dragoman nodded sharply to Heini.

‘I expect you to move on my orders immediately. The money will be transferred to you in two parts: one half before, and the other after, delivery of the pharmaceuticals.’ He paused a moment. ‘I don’t have to remind you to be discreet, Heini, do I? If I hear even the faintest rumour in the remotest border town, I will blame you.’

‘You’ll have your little pills,’ Heini assured him. ‘Don’t worry, I leave tomorrow. And Heini will have a wonderful time with his birthday gift when he gets home.’ He touched Anya’s golden hair then looked at Dragoman with admiration. ‘You truly are a wicked man, Felix. Heh.’

Dragoman tapped his index finger and thumb together and his shadow, lurking ever at his shoulders, produced a fresh cigarette in its holder and handed it to his master with the reverence due a peace pipe.

‘I am just a student of human nature, Heini. People are simple puppets. I like to watch them as they play out their little emotions, their base desires, their frailties.’ Dragoman blew smoke through his nose like a dragon. It was scented with cloves, an Indonesian kretek cigarette. ‘It amuses me.’

Stevie, eating cake, nodding to everything Gunnar Gobb said, heard every word.

‘Arrogant ass,’ was her first reaction, but she dismissed it quickly.
It was dangerous to despise one’s enemy. It led one to underestimate him, and it would not do to underestimate Felix Dragoman. She took another bite of the hideous cake. She was starving and it was the only thing that had been edible that evening. She needed the sugar to think.

She heard Anya say something to Heini in Russian, her voice low and dry with fear. Stevie leaned in as much as she dared and caught the word tualet.

‘What am I supposed to do about it? You can’t bloody go on your own.’ Heini turned to Dragoman in exasperation. ‘She’s not toilet trained? Like a naughty puppy, heh! You’ve given me a naughty puppy.’

‘She’s in your care now, my friend,’ Dragoman replied with a hint of a smile.

‘Send Sogol with her.’ Heini summoned the ginger-bearded muscle from the far wall with a wave of his fat hand. As the bodyguard lumbered over, Stevie vanished, heading on quick and nimble feet for the ladies room.

It was a proper powder room, with pale velvet chairs and a huge mirror cut in the shape of a butterfly. Hundreds of
tin butterflies, painted in art deco colours, were fixed on the walls and ceiling.

Stevie went through to the tiled area and into the end cubicle. She was counting on Anya heading for the same one, instinctively choosing the one furthest from her tormentors. The ceiling was tall and the old-fashioned cubicles did not reach all the way up. Stevie climbed onto the toilet seat and pulled herself up onto the top of the partitions. There she waited, flattened against the back wall, hoping that Sogol would not look up.

She knew enough about kidnap victims to guess what kind of state Anya would be in. The difficult part would be to get Anya to trust her. Everyone would be an enemy in her eyes and her fear would stop her listening properly. Her nerves would be shot and her mind blank; in that state, she might even scream and run back to the bodyguard.

Stevie needed to find the thing that would unfreeze her, something that would go straight through all her self-protecting zombie shells and reach Anya’s heart.

She heard Sogol the Barbarian enter. He wheezed like one of Heini’s pugs. He was checking the stalls. When they all appeared to be empty, he went to wait by the butterfly mirror, out of sight but not of earshot.

Stevie realised she couldn’t even afford to whisper to Anya. Sogol might hear. She pulled out her eyeliner. The old-fashioned water cistern above the seat would make a perfect canvas.

She hopped softly back down. She heard Anya’s heels clack towards the end stall and hoped she wouldn’t scream. The girl’s fright was evident in her eyes when she found Stevie crouching like a water hen on the toilet seat, but fortunately her yelp of surprise died before it could get out. Stevie put her finger to her lips and pointed at the cistern.

Anya read the word Stevie had written there: **Vadim**.

Suddenly her eyes filled with tears, then her hands flew to her face and she began to weep. The sight of her brother’s name at the centre of this strange and terrible night brought a tiny comfort, but with that came all the pain in the world.

Stevie was relieved; Anya had understood.

Sogol’s voice came over the stalls. ‘No crying, eh, only pissing. I want to hear pissing.’ He snorted phlegm.

Stevie took the young girl’s face in her hands and held her close, trying to give Anya all her own strength in that small moment. Then, smearing the indigo letters with her sleeve, she swung herself up onto the top of the cistern and disappeared along the row of stalls.

Nothing would stop Stevie now.

**Back in the ballroom, Stevie** found that Henning had attached himself to Heini’s party, the birthday boy slapping him on the shoulder and insisting they drink a toast to ‘birthday girls’. The thought of them had Heini in very high spirits.

Clever Henning, she thought and watched him clink shot glasses with horrid Heini and down the contents. He really did have a knack for making the most unlikely friends.

She heard Heini chuckle. He went to clap Dragoman on the shoulder again but the shadow stepped in.

‘Don’t you worry, Felix. One drink won’t slow things down, heh. The cars are waiting and we will be ready.’

Were they moving out? Henning would have to find out. Where their night was going, Stevie could not follow. Henning alone would be able to get much closer to Heini and Dragoman, and with far less suspicion. No doubt there would be drinking, and cigars, and women in the background.

She was irritated to find she felt a twinge of possessiveness when one of the candy canes put her arm around Henning’s shoulders and playfully kissed him on the cheek.

It was not difficult for her to slip into the role of ‘tired and emotional film starlet disgruntled with the world because of lack of attention to self’. She bid Henning a rather terse goodnight, pouting sulkily as he blew her a distracted kiss, immersed in the merriment.

‘And you better call me before you go to bed,’ Stevie called crossly over her shoulder, hoping this would give Henning a good excuse to use his mobile phone if he discovered anything. She noticed with a shiver that Dragoman’s eyes were on her, steady as beads. She hoped to death that her charade was as good as she thought it was.

The question in her mind, as she padded up the flight of carpeted stairs, was where would they take Anya? Would she join the merry party? It was unlikely. Heini seemed too distracted tonight . . .

**Her phone vibrated like a bumble bee in her pocket. Henning.**
‘Stevie. They’re sending for a nurse to drug Anya—“my niece is nervous of flying” and so on. They’ve got her in Heini’s rooms, I’m pretty sure. Heini’s planning to drive into Lichtenstein with her. I’m stuck here with them in the spa bath—well the lav, actually.’

‘Got that, Henning. I’m onto it.’ Stevie was suddenly full of dread.

‘Be careful, won’t you?’ she added, but he had already hung up.

A plan was forming as Stevie rushed down towards the medical centre located in the basement. All the drugs were locked up down there and reported in the register. Henning had noted it all on his visit.

David Rice always said, ‘Keep it simple, stupid.’ One’s imagination often dreamed up wild schemes but, without downplaying the ingenuity of many criminals and terrorists, it was often the simple, straightforward plan that worked: a shot to the head, a car bomb, a razor blade to the jugular.

Anyone heading upstairs from the nurses’ station had to pass through the sliding glass doors by the lift. Stevie positioned herself behind a display case that held souvenir t-shirts and bathrobes emblazoned with an enthusiastic *Gesundheit in Hoffenschaffen!* slogan, and lay in wait. The key to the cabinet hung on a small hook above her head. She pocketed it.

It wasn’t long before she heard a nurse’s trolley. Stevie stayed still until the nurse herself appeared, waiting for the lift, her back to Stevie. She had to be carrying Anya’s drugs—all the other guests were in the ballroom.

It was only the first time she had actually used it outside the training course, but the sleeper hold was surprisingly easy to execute and very effective. Standing behind the nurse, Stevie whipped her forearm around her narrow neck and pressed. She caught the woman as she went limp, then removed her white coat and hat and locked her in the display cabinet. She took off her feather gilet, smoothed her hair back and donned the nurse’s uniform. She wiped the excess makeup from her eyes. It would have to do.

Once in the lift, Stevie examined the clipboard on the trolley. It showed the room number, the name of the drug and the dosage: *Midazolam 10 mg.*

Stevie’s suspicions were confirmed. Midazolam was a strong sedative. It had similar effects to Rohypnol but, unlike Rohypnol, it could be injected. Ten milligrams would put a small girl like Anya out for at least four hours—and it only took a minute to take effect.

The drug was a perfect choice. With Midazolam, there was no danger of a drop in blood pressure so there was no need to monitor the patient’s vitals, and patients were able to breathe unassisted. Once drugged, Anya would be appear awake—rather stoned, but awake. She would not, however, be able to walk. But it meant that getting Anya safely out of the country would be simple: if anyone did notice her gogginess, it could be dismissed as drunkenness or food poisoning to anyone curious.

The Steinbock Room was Heini’s, and there was Sogol, standing at the door like a ginger bear, smoking a cigarette with his thumb and forefinger and picking his nose.

Stevie trundled towards him, a paper mask over her nose and mouth. She was counting on Sogol being as incurious as he looked. She could see the outline of a handgun under his jogging suit.

Sogol was expecting the nurse. He opened the door without a word and followed Stevie in, locking it behind him. He moved further into the room and then unlocked the bathroom door. He had, Stevie noted, left the key in the lock.

Anya was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, still in her velvet dress, shivering. Her eyes flashed with fear when the door opened, but Stevie was relieved to see that if Anya did recognise her eyes over the paper mask she gave no indication.

Stevie uncovered her metal tray and began to prepare the syringe. Fortunately she had once taken care of a diabetic dog who needed insulin and so had become quite proficient at giving injections.

When Anya saw the needle she screamed and cowered further into the corner, shaking.

Sogol grunted. He thought it was funny.

Stevie turned to him. ‘I will need your assistance. Please hold the girl.’

Sogol went over and grabbed Anya’s arms, holding her still. Tears were pouring down the girl’s face.

Stevie uncapped the needle on the syringe and moved towards her. She took hold of Anya’s arm and carefully swabbed the fragile limb with alcohol. Then she gave the syringe a good flick and pressed the plunger a millimetre to make sure there were no air bubbles.

‘Please, stay very—’

Stevie’s hand moved like a wasp, the syringe jabbing Sogol right in the jugular vein like a vicious slap. She
jammed the plunger down then ripped Anya from his surprised hands. Before Sogol could react, she had pushed the
prisoner out of the bathroom door, sprinted out behind her, then locked it, kicking the key under the bed.

She heard Sogol roar and rush at the door, another crash against it—would it hold?—then a thunderous thud on
the floor. The barbarian was out for the count.

Stevie ripped off her paper mask.
‘Run with me. We have no time.’

They pelted down the corridor, Anya barefoot, her evening dress ripped almost in two, Stevie dragging her by the
wrist.

They reached the boot room on the ground floor, dark and empty at this time of night. Stevie dialled Henning.
‘Darling!’ she said in a loud voice. ‘Where the hell are you?’

‘Just having a quiet chat with the boys, sweetie.’ She knew he must still be with Heini and Dragoman. She would
have to be careful.

‘It’s almost three!’ she protested loudly in case anyone could hear her end of the conversation through Henning’s
phone. Then she whispered, ‘I’ve got her.’

‘I won’t be much longer, darling,’ Henning reassured her. ‘I hope you’re tucked up in bed.’

‘Boot room,’ Stevie whispered, then louder, ‘Where else would I be?! Car keys.’ Stevie needed to help Henning
find an excuse to get away from the men. ‘I can’t sleep,’ she whined into the phone. ‘I need a pill.’

Henning sighed in exasperation. ‘Alright, my beauty. I’ll be right over with a nice sleepy cocktail for you.’

Stevie and Anya crouched in the darkness, their little hearts racing too fast to speak to each other.

A muffled thud-thud-thud seemed to come through the walls. At first Stevie thought it was her heart—or maybe
Anya’s—then she realised it was the sound of chopper blades.

Who was landing in the pre-dawn, in the car park?
The door burst open and Henning raced in. He had the car keys in his hand. The three of them ran through the
boot room and out of the external door.

Now they were in the frozen car park. They could see the helicopter hovering a few metres off the ground.
‘Maybe it’s guests arriving late . . .’ panted Stevie hopefully.

‘Then why don’t they have their lights on?’ Henning was right. The helicopter was not shining its landing lights.
If it hadn’t been for the thunderous noise it might have gone unremarked. From inside the sanatorium, it probably
had.

They ran for the Jaguar, Henning pulling Stevie, Stevie still holding Anya by the wrist. Fortunately Henning had
insisted the car be left outdoors, under a cover, despite the frost and snow.

Stevie heard boots hit ice—men were running out of the hotel entrance. Dragoman’s men. They were carrying
torches and guns. It wouldn’t be long before the three of them were found and the men wouldn’t be asking
questions. Thank goodness for the helicopter—it had drawn their attention.

Obviously not one of theirs then, thought Stevie.

The fugitives stayed crouching by the parked car, Henning pulling the cover off, ready for a quick getaway.
‘Can we get in, Henning? Anya’s feet must be frozen.’

‘Afraid not—these blasted bippers make a hell of a noise, and even if I use the key, the lights go on automatically.
We’ll glow like a Christmas tree.’

He took off his dinner jacket and put it around Anya’s shoulders. He gave his scarf to Stevie. ‘Wrap her feet in
this.’

The helicopter was still hovering centimetres off the ground when the door opened and four men in black fatigues
and heavy boots leapt out. In the semi-darkness, Stevie saw the clear outline of assault rifles.

Beside her, Henning muttered in a low voice, ‘SR-3 “Vikhr” compact assault rifles. We’re in trouble.’

‘What do you mean? Who are they?’ Stevie’s eyes were wide.

‘Russians,’ he whispered, eyes on the running men. ‘The SR-3 is used as a concealed weapon by the FSB, VIP
protection teams, and other Russian state security operatives. It’s pretty much the same size and weight as most
submachine guns but it fires much more potent, armour-piercing bullets.’

Stevie looked at Henning, surprised. ‘You know a lot about guns.’
Henning grinned in the dark. ‘I have an encyclopaedia of weapons— both volumes.’

Then Stevie remembered their conversation in The Boar about criminal tattoos; she realised she knew even less about Henning than she had thought.

‘Well,’ she whispered, ‘what are they doing here?’

The first man turned to shout something, and she recognised him immediately.

Dragoman had appeared, and was now standing prudently behind his men. He obviously recognised him, too. He drew, of all things, a golden gun.

‘Orlikov,’ Henning said.

‘You don’t think they’ve come to rescue Anya, do you?’

Henning shook his head. ‘The dead man obviously had a friend that Dragoman’s men never found.’

Orlikov and his men raised their guns.

Stevie nudged Henning. ‘What’s that one? It’s much bigger than the SR-3s.’ Henning squinted in concentration.

‘It’s an AKS-74U Shorty Assault Rifle—a relative of the Kalashnikov—with a silent fire device and silent underbarrel grenade launcher. I don’t think these chaps are going to be overly concerned with collateral damage.’

Orlikov’s men took out two of Dragoman’s guards with four shots, easy as ducks. In response, there was immediately a volley of gunfire from the others; Orlikov and his men took refuge behind a Hummer parked in the lot. Bullets zinged about like fireflies in the night.

Stevie, the words ‘grenade launcher’ turning in her head, shoved Anya under the Jaguar and prayed. Dragoman now ran back inside the castle, his shadow giving covering fire. The siege had begun.

Stevie put her mouth close to Henning’s ear so he could hear her over the deafening gunfire. ‘I say we wait until the shooting’s stopped and then we make a break for it,’ she said. ‘Orlikov’s men won’t be interested in us—they don’t even know we exist.’

Henning nodded. ‘Best thing if we could create a distraction for both teams . . .’

Stevie had an idea.

Quickly stripping off the white nurse’s coat she was still wearing over her evening clothes, she crumpled it into a ball.

‘Henning, give me your lighters—all of them.’

Henning pulled three cigarette lighters from his pockets and handed them to her.

‘Stay here. I’ll be back.’

Stevie took off, crawling through the gravelly snow on her hands and knees, heading for an old Mercedes on the other side of the lot.

There was more gunfire, bullets, breaking glass. It all sounded terribly random to Stevie and she hoped they would not be hit by a stray bullet.

What would Gunnar Gobb tell his guests in the morning, when all the damaged cars would be revealed? A plague of locusts perhaps . . .

she almost smiled at the thought.

Crouching by the rear wheel—petrol tank side—of the Mercedes, Stevie quickly drained the lighter fluid from two lighters into the balled-up fabric, then shoved it on the top of the wheel. She fired up the third of Henning’s lighters and set fire to the fabric. It burned slowly but steadily. Satisfied, she wriggled herself back to the parked Jaguar.

Suddenly it went quiet. The shooting had stopped. Stevie poked her head cautiously up over the bonnet and came face to face with one of Orlikov’s men. The man, with his boiled brown eyes, raised the tip of his gun and pointed it at Stevie’s forehead.

‘Ne dvygatsya.’

Stevie didn’t think she could have moved, even if she had wanted to. The grenade-launching Kalashnikov had snap-frozen her legs.

The man radioed in. ‘Got her.’

The hair rose on Stevie’s scalp. Got her? But they couldn’t have sent all these men after her, could they? What about Dragoman?
Then, to her horror, she saw the letters GROM under the man’s collar.

The Russian word for thunder, it also stood for the GROM Security Company, the Kremlin’s private army, manned by former KGB special forces soldiers of all kinds. They were a quasi-private organisation that served the federal government exclusively and were not bound by the constraints and laws of Russia’s official armed forces. They could be dispatched without the permission of the president.

GROM had been sent by the siloviki, there could be no doubt now. Stevie prayed Anya would have the sense to stay hidden where she was, and that Henning would stay with the girl. The order came back over the radio.

‘Kill her.’

Stevie had run out of time. Her eyes turned to the man’s gun.

On a Kalashnikov, the safety catch can’t be released while the finger is on the trigger. This meant a precious two seconds—finger off, release safety, reposition finger—before fire. Providing of course that the gunman has been trained to keep the safety on.

Stevie knew the PLO were, but Russian Spetsnaz—she could only hope.

Two seconds.

Her small body filled with adrenaline.

Before she could blink a huge ball of fire shot up into the night. The petrol tank, heated by the burning nurse’s uniform, had caught fire and the lovely Mercedes was incinerated in seconds.

Stevie crouched down then shot forward, her hands clenched in a double fist, straight for the assassin’s groin.

The man stumbled. Henning leapt from behind the car and grabbed him in a headlock, pulling him down. Stevie scrambled up and grabbed her knife, holding the point half a millimetre from the man’s right eye.

He was clearly shocked.

That was the beautiful advantage of being a girl, thought Stevie, no one ever expected you to fight so dirty.

Henning searched him quickly, taking away his other gun, his boot knife, his radio. In the man’s pocket he found a photo of Dragoman, and one of Stevie, taken in St Moritz.

‘It’s rather good, actually,’ he said, handing it over to her.

It had been taken in the Suvretta House, the day before the polo match—Stevie remembered, she had been wearing her pearl earrings.

There was a huge explosion in the west wing of the sanatorium and Stevie guessed Dragoman and his men were battling Orlikov there.

They had to move fast.

Henning raised his fist and elbowed the man hard and sharp in the temple. He crumpled and lost consciousness.

Stevie, rather stunned, stared up at Henning. ‘Since when do librarians punch like that?’

Henning fumbled with the car door. ‘Libraries these days are much more rowdy. Students are not what they used to be.’

Stevie scrutinised her friend for a moment, noting his bloodshot eyes. ‘How many vodkas did you drink with Heini, Henning?’

‘Enough that perhaps you should drive.’ He threw her the keys.

The three escapees leapt into the Jaguar and sped out.

‘Lucky you parked cavalry rules,’ said Stevie, spinning the steering wheel.

‘Always facing out. Old habits die hard.’

Stevie headed for the exit but they had forgotten the helicopter, crouched like a scorpion on the snow. Stevie slowly circled the car park, headlights off.

‘This car’s not bulletproof is it?’

‘No, Stevie, afraid not. It’s not usually required in my line of work.’

They saw Dragoman and his shadow racing out of the entrance. Dragoman was stumbling, holding his eyes, his shadow holding him by the arm. They were heading for the helicopter, circling around behind it so the pilot could not see them.

The shadow reached the machine, wrenched the door open and shot the pilot in the face. Tossing the body aside, he shoved Dragoman into the chopper and leapt to the controls. The helicopter lurched wildly then righted itself.
The rotor blades spun faster as it began to leave the ground.

Orlikov appeared, covered in blood, and began to run for the helicopter. A sudden burst of machine-gun fire exploded into the top of his head. He crumpled.

‘I think it’s high time we left.’ Stevie, shaking with adrenaline, put her foot on the accelerator and drove straight for the helicopter.

It cleared the car by inches, the Jaguar roaring through the gates at high speed, the snow whipping up around them in the rotor wind.

Stevie looked up as they passed. The shadow was staring right at her—for a split second their eyes met—and then the helicopter was gone into the night and their car was a hundred metres down the icy road.
Pale light had begun to creep into the valley. It was day break. The road circled down the mountain, the sanatorium growing ever so slowly smaller on the other side of the ravine.

Stevie turned the heating up on full, poor Anya was shivering like a lake in the back seat.

‘Are you alright?’ Stevie asked.

Henning turned around and spoke to Anya quietly, holding her frozen hand, coaxing her. It would help that he was a familiar face, she thought. Mostly though, Anya would be in shock. Stevie had seen it before. One never knew how long the kidnap victim would take to recover: sometimes weeks, sometimes years, sometimes never. They could at least be thankful that Anya appeared unhurt.

Stevie concentrated on speeding down the winding mountain road. She was beginning to feel lightly euphoric, the adrenaline of terror wearing off, the happiness of having rescued the girl kicking in. They were driving, she was sure, towards a happy ending. That didn’t happen often now, did it? Not often enough.

‘Stevie,’ Henning’s voice was full of alarm. ‘Anya says there were two other girls with her.’

The cold crept back into her heart. ‘What?’

‘In the sanatorium, held captive with Anya.’

‘Dasha and Ludmilla,’ Anya said, her voice quivering. ‘They never told me their last names. Yesterday, the man told them they were going to be a gift to a fighter from Sudan who was buying lots of his guns.’

Stevie was speechless as the horror sank in.

Then came the sound of sirens in the distance.

‘The Swiss police!’ She almost shouted with sheer relief. ‘They must have heard the explosions.’

‘They’ll find the girls,’ she told Anya reassuringly. ‘Don’t worry, Anya, my love, they’ll be—’

She was cut short by the young girl’s gasp and spun to follow her gaze.

The west wing of the sanatorium was clearly visible from the road now, although they were below it and on the other side of the ravine. Two tiny figures, one in a bright pink top, the other in canary yellow, were standing up on the balustrade of a stone balcony. They were holding hands.

‘Nyet!’ Anya screamed.

Like tiny blossoms from a tree the two bodies fell, so slowly it seemed, through the air until they disappeared from view, lost in the ravine.

For kilometres, no one in the car could speak.

Anya was the first to break the long silence with her low whisper. ‘Ludmilla was always saying she would rather die.’ Tears were rolling out of her eyes like marbles now. ‘They promised each other they would stick together, no matter what.’

Stevie’s eyes were fixed to the icy road but her mind replayed the falling girls over and over.

‘They decided they would rather jump and die free.’ Anya was staring at her hands. ‘At least then you know what is going to happen to you.’ She looked up at Stevie. ‘They’re dead, aren’t they?’

Stevie nodded. ‘No one could survive a fall from that height. I’m sorry, Anya.’

The river was fast and deep. The bodies would probably get swept down the mountain and either catch under a rock, or end up at the bottom of a lake. It was unlikely they would ever be found.

No one spoke again until they reached the street lamps of Zurich and the safety of Stevie’s home by the woods.

Things felt better after hot showers and fresh clothes. They were sitting in Stevie’s tiny kitchen, around her even tinier kitchen table. Her flat was above the lake, by the edge of the woods. The floors were polished parquet and the shared garden below was full of apple trees—naked in the winter light. In the summer, pots of red geraniums flowered on the balcony.

Stevie made Anya a warm Ovomaltine with milk then lit the gas under her metal coffee pot.

Henning had called Irina and Vadim. Aware that the telephone of Kozkov’s widow and son might be monitored, Henning had merely called to offer condolences for Valery’s passing, then added ‘but there are so many reasons to be happy,’ and urged them to visit him and see for themselves. They had understood from this that Anya was safe and they were on their way to Zurich on the first plane out of Shermeteyevo airport.
Anya had not been able to speak to her mother, but that would come later. Everyone was just happy to be alive.

Stevie toasted slices of Walliser mountain bread under the grill and put butter, a pot of blueberry jam, and a large slice of Emmenthal cheese on the table.

Anya, warmed by the shower and the hot drink, was beginning to relax a little. Stevie and Henning asked her gentle questions, not wanting to press too hard, knowing she would be exhausted from her ordeal.

She told them how she had gone with Petra to Zima in Moscow and they had been offered work as models. Petra had pressed her to meet the men the next day at GUM. She had ordered a tea with lemon, and the next thing she could remember she was locked up and blindfolded. Stevie guessed the kidnappers had probably been drugging Anya’s tea with Rohypnol, which would explain why she could not remember much, just this series of confusing and terrifying images.

Mostly, Anya said, she had been worried for her family. She remembered she cried a lot, and read the magazines her captors sometimes gave to her. She had liked the interviews at home with the stars the best. She had no idea how long she had been captive.

Stevie then told Henning about the nurse, the syringe of Midazolam and the ginger barbarian, then their flight to the boot room.

She jumped up as the coffee pot boiled. ‘Dragoman must have been looking for us when he ran into the car park.’

‘I left in a bit of a hurry,’ Henning added. ‘They must have got suspicious.’

‘Well, the men from GROM were a good distraction.’

Anya looked up from her breakfast. ‘Were the men there to rescue me?’

‘No.’ Stevie poured out another cup of coffee and thought how beautiful the wintry trees looked gathered at her doorstep. It felt so good to be home. ‘They were there to kill Felix Dragoman. And me. They thought I had your father’s secret list and that I had passed it on to him, that Dragoman and I were working together. Actually Valery didn’t tell me anything, but the siloviki weren’t to know that.’

‘But why would Dragoman want the list anyway?’ Anya asked, her eyes deep and round with fatigue. ‘Doesn’t he know who his partners are?’

Stevie shot a look at Henning. He was particularly attractive that morning, she thought, all freshly shaved and full of purpose.

‘Of course,’ she nodded to Anya, ‘but he doesn’t have the meticulously gathered evidence of their corruption that would be his most powerful bargaining chip. The list would have been hugely valuable to him.’

Stevie opened the kitchen window and put a handful of toast crumbs on the window sill. It was still freezing outside and she noticed icicles hanging from the eaves of her building.

The image of the man in the snow, neck snapped like a sapling, ambushed her and Stevie suddenly felt a little sick.

‘The man that was killed in the snow was from GROM, too,’ she added, closing the window. ‘The insignia on the knife was a bat on a blue globe. At the time I couldn’t remember which special forces group use the bat as their emblem. Dragoman recognised it straight away.’

‘He must have radioed Moscow before he was killed.’ Henning was watching her closely, concern in his still-bloodshot eyes. ‘Orlikov would have leapt to the conclusion that little mysterious Stevie Duveen had already killed two of his men.’

Stevie smiled at him, happy that Henning was with them—with her—in the little kitchen.

‘It must have made them wonder who on earth I was really working for . . .’ Stevie turned her empty cup in circles. ‘Until they saw Dragoman appear. That would have been quite a surprise.’

Anya was buttering her third piece of toast, the colour returning to her cheeks. ‘That man told me no one was coming to rescue me, that he had power over the Kremlin. I don’t know why he said these things to me. I guess he thought I was going to disappear forever.’ Anya smiled happily.

Stevie shuddered at the thought of how close she had come to doing just that.

Henning refilled Stevie’s coffee cup, a hand lightly on her shoulder. ‘Dragoman would have been convinced his friends in the Kremlin had turned on him when Orlikov jumped out. We know he recognised his face because he pointed him out on the television. Stevie saw him through the window.’
Anya’s eyes opened wide and stared at Stevie in wonder. ‘It was you on the roof? Dragoman went so crazy after that.’

Henning grinned. ‘I bet he did—it was quite a show.’ He squeezed her shoulder and Stevie felt herself blushing, but she left his hand there, enjoying the warmth of his touch.

‘So,’ Henning asked, ‘will Dragoman pursue his vendetta against the siloviki?’

Stevie nodded. ‘I’m guessing he will—he survived, didn’t he? And he’s not a man who forgets. I think we’re going to start seeing a series of accidents and mysterious deaths, possibly a small epidemic of suicides . . .’

‘How grim.’

‘Maybe, but without the list, Dragoman’s probably the only one outside the circle who knows who the bad guys are.’ Stevie put her cup down and looked at Henning, her clear green eyes steady.

‘It’s as close to justice for Anya and for Valery Kozkov as we’re going to get.’

They both glanced at Anya but she seemed not to be listening, her attention caught by two sparrows flitting on the window sill, pecking happily at the toast crumbs Stevie had put there for them.

Good, thought Stevie. The sooner Anya put all this behind her, the better. A quest for a justice that would as likely never come, given the current administration’s track record, would only poison what was left of her childhood.

Stevie didn’t think this made her a cynic. She was far from being that. She believed strongly in the power of good to triumph, and in the responsibility of the individual to do what good they could. But she was no fantasist. Ideals were important, but they meant nothing if they didn’t have a human face; and sometimes the person was more important than the concept.

Stevie also suspected Vadim might feel differently. She hoped he wouldn’t do anything silly.
Their heads appeared amongst the crowd at the Bahnhof and Anya ran to meet them. Irina’s face was awash with tears as she held her daughter close, the pause button in her life now released. Vadim held Anya’s hand tight, wouldn’t let it go, not even when they ordered five celebratory glasses of champagne and drank them standing, as was fitting, in the bustling anonymity of the railway bar. They would be safer in a crowd.

For a few minutes amongst the little group, there was only pure and unmitigated joy.

Stevie herself couldn’t stop smiling. Although Kozkov was dead, nothing could change that. The time to mourn the dead would come, but Anya was alive and right now it was about rejoicing in the living.

While Anya and her mother chattered away, Vadim said very little. Stevie watched his face closely. He was so pale she could see the faint blue veins under his skin. She doubted he would ever be the same again, and moved closer to the boy.

She held out a cigarette. ‘Sometimes you have to let it go or it consumes you. My father was murdered too, and my mother.’

Vadim took the cigarette and fixed haunted eyes on Stevie. ‘Didn’t you want revenge?’

‘I still have no idea who did it. I’ll find out one day . . . It was a case of mistaken identity.’ She shrugged her shoulders at her young friend. ‘What was I going to do, run around killing people at random to satisfy my rage? Then the assassins would have destroyed me as well as my parents. I suppose I went into this line of work instead.’

Vadim stared past her and out at the milling crowds on the platform. ‘I saw Gregori Maraschenko, you know, one day in Moscow. I went looking for him at The Boar and I followed him for three days. I wanted to kill him. I carried my knife in my jacket and walked the streets.’

This was exactly what Stevie had been afraid of.

‘On the third day,’ Vadim continued, ‘he went to the banya and I followed him in. It was so steamy in there. I managed to get very close, on the same bench. We sat there sweating together for half an hour. My mind was crazy.’

Vadim drew heavily on the cigarette. ‘I wanted to kill him for what he had done to Anya. I wanted to slit his throat. But my knife was in the locker. I think I was almost glad it was—then I told myself I was a coward for feeling glad. What brother wouldn’t avenge his sister? I wasn’t worthy of being called a brother. My heart wanted to shrivel and die. I was so angry and so powerless.’

His free hand was shredding a paper napkin into snowflakes. ‘I even thought about killing myself. Idiot, neh?’

Stevie smiled back. ‘Idiot.’

‘Then I saw another man come in. Even in the mist I could see he had the most frightening eyes—black and small and cold. Maraschenko got up and went to sit on a stone slab in the centre of the banya. When a new burst of steam filled the room with the eyes got up too. He walked over to Maraschenko. I thought maybe they were friends.’ Vadim’s voice grew hoarse. ‘Suddenly he grabbed him by the hair and cracked his skull against the stone. He did it twice. It made a sound like billiard balls.’

Vadim was shaking and Stevie wasn’t surprised. ‘Then he dropped his head, wiped his hands on his towel and walked out. Maraschenko was unconscious or maybe dead already, bleeding from the back of the head. The heat in the banya made the blood flow faster and faster. It started to drip and pool. I—’ He looked as if he might be sick. Instead he downed his drink. ‘I left after that,’ he whispered.

Stevie was staring at the Bahnhof clock. She didn't know what to say. Maraschenko’s killer might have been Orlikov himself—Vadim’s description of his eyes was unmistakable. Maraschenko’s link to Dragoman had been enough to get him killed. It was happening already.

Stevie felt so relieved Vadim had not killed the man, but horrified at what had happened. And yet it was all part of the plan she had set in motion.

Was she now a killer, too? Shouldn’t she feel guilty?

She did feel guilty, and sick.

Only by looking across at little Anya’s happy face and Irina’s tears could she numb the horrid feeling in her throat. Every action had a reaction and they were all living out the consequences of their choices, good and bad.

‘How is Masha Ivanovna?’ she asked finally.

Vadim’s face cleared. ‘Very busy saving Russia.’ He shrugged. ‘The eternal optimist. She has finished her book
on the lives of ordinary Russians. She didn’t know whether she should leave Gregori Maraschenko’s story in it, out of respect for my family. I told her she must.’ Vadim brushed his hair nervously from his eyes. ‘I think she feels partly responsible for everything because she brought Gregori into our lives, but I told her they would have found another way. It wasn’t her fault.’

‘Well, if there’s anything I can do to help,’ Stevie gave a little shrug, ‘tell me.’

‘Masha is writing an article. Apparently my father sent her some papers before he died—I don’t know what they were. Masha is very excited. She won’t say anything more—only that my father asked her to memorise the papers and destroy them if he was killed. Masha wants the article published all over the world. Then the red walls of the Kremlin will tremble like an earthquake, she says. Perhaps you can help us get the article published in England.’

Stevie felt a wild surge of hope. Could the papers Masha was talking about be Kozkov’s list? She would say nothing about it. Masha was right. The less anyone knew, the better.

‘I think I can help with that,’ Stevie said slowly. She could call Rosie for starters, and David Rice knew everyone. He would help. In fact, she ought really to call him back.

She stepped outside the café and dialled his number. Secretly she admitted to herself that she wanted his praise for getting Anya back.

‘Rice.’

‘It’s Stevie.’

‘How and where the hell are you?’

‘Zurich. Anya’s with us. She’s safe.’

‘I heard the good tidings. Thank God,’ he huffed out. There was a brief pause, then he said, ‘Stevie, have you seen the news broadcast this morning?’

‘It’s not on the news is it?’ Stevie was dismayed. ‘I haven’t told anyone—I thought it would be safer for all the Kozkovs if they were just quietly forgotten. I’ll murder whoever blew their cover!’

There was another, longer pause. ‘No, you did a good job with that. I assumed as much. Discretion has always been your virtue in this job.’

The announcement for platform five drowned out most of what came next. Stevie managed to catch—

‘—damn fine.’

Did he mean her? She was too shy to ask him to repeat himself. Anyway, it was too late. Rice had rung off.

Stevie wandered about the station aimlessly. She didn’t feel like going back into the bar. Hadn’t Rice mentioned the news?

There was a screen above the escalators. The daily news was constantly on play, the ticker tape running a foot high beneath it. She stood and watched, all of a sudden feeling very tired.

Just as she was about to turn back to join the others, a bulletin stopped her in her tracks. The television was showing a human shape on a snowy footpath. The snow around had been stained red. Stevie’s eyes strained to read the words on the ticker tape.

She couldn’t believe it. Not again.

Masha Ivanovna Osipova had apparently jumped from her fifth-floor window, committed suicide.

Stevie, her hand to her mouth, began to cry.

The television showed a close-up, the body, the blood, a brown bag of groceries spilling open. Stevie knew at once Masha had not jumped. No one committed suicide with a full bag of shopping. There was to have been a vegetable soup, some smoked fish, black bread—perhaps an almond cake—in her future, to be shared most likely with her thirteen-year-old son. The groceries were an undeniable testament that Masha had intended to keep on living. Her assassination was a statement of utter indifference to her intentions, a blunt denial of her right to consider her life her own. She had been tossed out her own window like orange peel.

Stevie imagined Masha’s flight through the morning air, the buckling of bones and the exploding of organs as her body hit, then the pooling blood on ice and the unravelling of carefully laid plans for the summer.

Moscow and Masha’s world seemed a million miles away from Zurich, but it was only a plane ride. What could be thought of a place that tolerated the murder of journalists—of anyone inconvenient? The annoying, the unwelcome, were disposed of like old Friday girls. Whoever had killed Masha hadn’t even bothered to make it look like a proper suicide. Because they knew no one would want to find the truth. To the siloviki, and those who lived in
the vile shadow of their protection, Masha was better off dead.

Suddenly loss and death were all around her and it was too much. Stevie leaned against pillar and wept until she shook. Spent, her nose so blocked she had to breathe through her mouth, Stevie felt a small hand.

Anya was behind her, holding out her gold chain and the evil eye that hung from it like a tear drop. Irina had kept it safe. Anya now wanted Stevie to have it.

Stevie took it from her with a small smile but she still couldn’t speak. She held up her hand in a half-wave, half-salute and walked away, losing herself a little unsteadily in the crowds, hoping the passers-by would blame her swollen red nose on a nasty cold.

She headed for the soothing shores of the lake. Horizons seemed to shrink troubles and she needed proper fresh air.

Where the river Limmat flowed into the lake, by the Bellevueplatz bridge, the water was not frozen. Against the snow, and the ice further out, it looked black. The lake front along it was coated in ice, a phenomenon Stevie hadn’t seen for years.

The wind, coming down from the Alps, skims the Zürichsee and sweeps droplets of water up onto the shore. They freeze where they land, swaddling steel railings, tree branches, lamp posts, even parked cars, in cocoons of white ice.

It was impossible to walk by the shore. The pavement was frosted in ripples. The wind had shaped the ice with a genius sculptor’s hand into the wild shapes of Dali or God. Stevie stood on the bridge and looked out, a small figure in a dark coat, lost to the wind.

The lake ferry was not running, but the ferry master, bristling in his heavy jacket, his seaman’s cap, was smoking a cigarette clamped in an ebony cigarette-holder. He was standing on the dock watching his ship.

Stevie wandered over and asked if she could go aboard. If the ferry master thought the request odd, he didn’t show it. Perhaps he realised that Stevie’s red nose wasn’t a cold, that she needed to be on the water and alone.

Like everything else, the deck was covered in ice; a pair of small brown ducks was sheltering in the lee. The boat moved gently on the patch of black water. Opposite, Stevie could see the wooden Schwimm–bad, in summer full of sunbathers and swimmers in coloured caps, but today grey and dusted with snow. The renovations were still unfinished and the place looked forlorn, the sky above it heavy with the unshed snow.

Things had come to an end and Stevie felt lost. Irina, Anya and Vadim were moving to Zurich. She had insisted and they had been glad to comply. Moscow was no longer home—the bad memories overshadowed the good and, in any case, it was too dangerous for them now.

Stevie hoped Vadim’s revenge fantasy had played itself out in that horrible scene he had witnessed. Revenge was not justice, but she found it hard to find fault with Vadim. When a society could no longer have faith in its government to uphold the laws and to redress their grievances, then people would begin to take matters into their own hands. They could see no other choice. Every man in power was, after all, just a man.

Wasn’t that the universal hero’s story, the wresting back of control for the individual life from forces larger than yourself—monsters, earthquakes, madness, despotism—and the restoration of dignity? There was glory in that struggle, Stevie thought as she lit her last cigarette, and it was what Masha and Kozkov and so many others had died for. It was important to remember them.

We were all capable of small heroics; we were all capable of being masters of our own destinies if we chose to be. It was time, Stevie decided, to think about the future.

She would lend the Kozkovs her flat until they got settled. It would make a good excuse to get away. She would tell Rice she needed a break and disappear until the cold shadows had melted.

Somewhere hot, she thought. Very hot.

Along the bridge, walking against the wind, she saw a tall figure in a herringbone overcoat.

**Henning and Stevie stood on** the frozen deck looking out at the ice and said nothing for a long time. The tips of Stevie’s eyelashes had frosted where they had been wet.

‘What are you going to do, Stevie? What if Dragoman comes after you . . . ?’ Henning looked at her.

‘He’s a businessman. I have to believe I’m not worth the expense or the effort. Out of sight, out of mind.’ Her eyes were on the tips of the Alps on the far side of the lake. ‘Anyway, I could use a long holiday.’

Stevie hoped she sounded resolute and brave, because she didn’t feel it.

The ferry master had climbed on board unnoticed. He switched on the ship’s PA system and a beautiful voice as
lonely as a star drifted out and swirled around the boat. Stevie recognised it immediately—it was singing ‘Casta Diva’, an aria from Bellini’s opera, *Norma*.

The dark voice sent shivers across Stevie’s shoulders. It could belong only to Maria Callas.

She turned to Henning. ‘I think the captain thinks we’re lovers.’

Henning looked down at Stevie, his blue eyes burning now. ‘Aren’t we?’

Stevie waited, looking everywhere for her courage. Finally, shyly, she said, ‘Well, not yet.’

Then Henning smiled like the sun. Stevie felt suddenly warm. She moved closer to him and, not quite tall enough to reach his shoulder, she leaned her head against his chest. Henning drew her in close and held her.

On the far side of the lake, a ray of sunlight struggled through the clouds and hung like a gold rope against the dark sky.

It had to be a sign, thought Stevie, something good.

The ferry master appeared on deck and stood to one side, looking out.

‘Hear that?’ he grunted.

There was a groaning, cracking sound. Stevie heard it again—and now the sound was all around them, like whales meeting and bridges falling, loud and eerie.

‘The ice is moving,’ said the ferry master, leaning on the rails.

‘Spring is coming.’
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# Table of Contents

| COVER PAGE                     | 1 |
| TITLE PAGE                    | 2 |
| COPYRIGHT PAGE                | 3 |
| DEDICATION                    | 4 |
| CONTENTS                      | 5 |
| PROLOGUE                      | 6 |
| 1                             | 7 |
| 2                             | 8 |
| 3                             | 9 |
| 4                             | 10 |
| 5                             | 11 |
| 6                             | 12 |
| 7                             | 13 |
| 8                             | 14 |
| 9                             | 15 |
| 10                            | 16 |
| 11                            | 17 |
| EPILOGUE                      | ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS |
| 12                            |  |