

Prologue

Upright in the backseat, the FSB officer waited for the Range Rover to glide to a halt outside the battlemented walls of Novodevichy Convent. Founded in 1524 as a place of exile for high-ranking women in disfavour, its cluster of onion-domed churches had served as a barracks for Napoleon during the occupation of Moscow and as warehouses during the Soviet era. Now, once again, the complex functioned as a place of worship.

The officer climbed out, hunching his heavy overcoat tightly around him, and strode briskly down to the pond by the side of the monastery. A woman sat on a bench, huddled from the cold, faceless in the flower-patterned shawl that wrapped her head and shoulders. Her fingers worked the beads of a wooden rosary as she stared out over the frozen stretch of water. Sitting down next to her, he placed a cassette player the size of a pack of cards between them and pressed 'Play'.

"The rebels have been biding their time, waiting for the right moment," the voice grated, coarse as gravel, too loud in the stillness that surrounded them. The FSB man reached down to adjust the volume. "But now they're ready for the off."

"That's him, Ramaz, the informant," he filled her in through tight lips.

The woman slid her hand over to stop the machine. "What's behind this?" she pressed, her voice low in the frosty air. She paused, as her fingers continued to flick the smooth beads. "He's from Ingushetia himself. You'd think he'd be all for his own country grabbing the chance of independence?"

"Money, of course – and his own self-interest," the FSB man replied, his eyes trained on the rutted grey ice of the pond before them. "Ramaz has always spoken out against the separatists loud and clear. His fortune's here in Russia. Billions of it - and he's all too aware that a revolt in Ingushetia would risk the same backlash the Chechen businessmen got a few years back. If that happened, he'd lose the lot."

"So whose feeding him his inside information?"

The officer shrugged. "We don't know, but you're right to ask – it's a priority to find out. The Ingush in Moscow are a pretty tight-knit bunch, but we'd gone out of our way to ensure Ramaz was kept in the dark. We must assume we have a mole somewhere."

The woman restarted the tape.

"But where's the money coming from?" a second voice interjected. Again, it was a man's voice, but lighter toned. He spoke in Russian, but with a strong American accent. "Ingushetia itself doesn't have the resources to take on Russia."

"Of course not," the rougher voice scoffed. "Blok's dealing with that angle himself through his Tyndersk connection."

"Who's the foreigner he's talking to?" the woman asked.

"We're working on that too," the FSB man replied.

Pocketing the cassette player, he stood up. "Your job is to take Ramaz out. No need for subtlety. We need to make an example."

The woman's hand clenched on the rosary as he walked away, and the quiet clicking of the beads stopped. Almost on cue, the bells on the nearest tower swung into action, spilling their discordant jangle into the cold and hovering mist as she watched him leave.

Outside the pristine grandeur of the National Hotel demonstrators swarmed in untidy hordes. The roads had been closed off to traffic since dawn in anticipation of the influx of protesters, and many thousands had converged on central Moscow, cramming the wide avenue from pavement to pavement. Nearby, from the Tverskaya metro entrance, a steady

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stream augmented the main throng, pressing towards Red Square where the rally's official start was due to get underway in less than an hour.

Nadia fought her way against the flow and entered the hotel. Glancing fleetingly back at Murat, her accomplice, who carried a briefcase a few paces behind her, she nodded almost imperceptibly. Inside, two security guards stationed behind a table stopped people for random checks. As she approached, she tripped, tumbling over in front of them. With her skirt hiked up enough to be interesting, she winced and clutched her ankle. The two guards rushed to help her to a chair, and Murat slipped quietly past.

A few moments later, she rose to her feet, aided by the guards, and hobbled across the foyer to the lifts. Murat awaited her on the fourteenth floor, and together they made their way through the labyrinth of corridors to Suite 1493. Nadia knocked on the door. As expected, there was no answer. Murat ran a card through the reader and the door clicked open.

The two of them had studied the layout in advance and each knew their role to the last detail. Quickly they headed for Ramaz's office.

Outside the National, the demonstrators still surged relentlessly towards Red Square. Nadia threaded her way through into the Manezh gardens until she reached the shelter of the Kremlin's outer walls. In the grand scheme of things the problems facing oligarchs like Blok and Ramaz ranked pretty low on the scale, she reflected, looking out over the massed banners that stretched as far as the Kremlin walls and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In the current economic meltdown no economy had been more devastated than Russia's. Protest rallies like this were an expression of the people's anger at losing their jobs and savings, and they were taking place all over the country.

Murat wrestled through the crowd to join her.

"Ramaz has just gone in," he murmured in her ear. "Should reach his office any moment now."

An instant later, Nadia felt the air shake around her from the force of the explosion, and glanced back towards the National. Glass and masonry rained down on the crowd, which for a split-second froze, uncomprehending. Then the screaming started. Hemmed in on all sides by the weight of numbers, few could reach cover. Their panic escalated as beneath their feet blood tainted the snow.

Silent among the screams, Nadia saw a child in a yellow knitted hat clutching his mother's hand, severed from her arm by a falling shard of glass. Transfixed, he stared down at her body bent double at his feet.

Nadia turned away. One hand reflexively traced the contours of the scar on her cheek as she tried to block out the wails of the injured and grieving. Why did her victims always include the innocent, each time caught in the fall-out of her actions?

She looked back as the smoke cleared. Murat touched her arm and pointed to where, high in the hotel's shattered frontage, a crater gaped as big as a car. Reluctantly Nadia glanced up and then looked at him. She nodded slightly, with no hint of satisfaction.

Yes, Murat, another job well done.

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

Moscow

It had all the slickness of a military operation. Traffic police manned every junction, blocking the constant tide of Moscow's morning traffic to let the two unmarked FSB cars flash by unimpeded. In front and behind, an armed cavalcade; above, a helicopter tracking their progress.

In the back of the second car, Alex Leksin keyed a number into his mobile and waited impatiently for the connection. Dressed in his trademark dark navy blazer, for once he wore a tie over his crisp, blue-striped shirt.

"Joe?" he snapped, a rare note of urgency in his voice. "We're two minutes away."

He slipped the phone back into his pocket as the cars flew across Novy Arbat and swept into Maly Plotnikov, a quiet street just off Moscow's bustling centre. Halfway down, they screeched to a halt outside a cafe. Leksin bent forward over his long legs to watch as Joe Clinton emerged and was shepherded across the pavement to join him. The sirens resumed, and they sped away.

Leksin turned to his friend. They'd met in Boston: Leksin a postgrad at Harvard, Clinton a stringer at the Globe. Now he freelanced as an investigative journalist. Highly respected, his insightful columns about the Russian political and economic scene were syndicated around the world. Leksin eyed him intently. A thin, rather academic-looking figure, his face was pallid, stretched with fatigue and fear, and his eyes darted nervously, as if anticipating attack. He was wearing yesterday's clothes.

"You look rough, Joe," Leksin summed it up, forcing a smile.

"Wouldn't you in my position?" Clinton asked, grimacing. "I've been on the run all goddam night."

"I thought it went with the territory," Leksin replied. "You've said it yourself - for any hack poking around in Russia, danger's part of the package."

Only a year ago, Clinton's younger brother and his family had come over to visit Moscow. Clinton had been with them on the Garden Ring, when armed men had ambushed their car and emptied their magazines into it. Clinton himself had been rushed to hospital with multiple gunshot wounds. The doctors had told Leksin he wouldn't make it, but his friend had defied their prediction. His brother and family had not been so lucky: only his six-year-old niece had survived. Clinton had not forgiven himself for their deaths. Nowadays he took care of the girl, almost as an act of penance.

"Are we sorted?" Clinton asked.

Leksin nodded. "Nikolai's waiting for us at the Kremlin." Nikolai Koriakov was deputy Minister at the Department for Overseas Development and another old ally. Monitoring the rogue states on Russia's soft underbelly, like Chechnya and Ingushetia, fell directly into his patch. As soon as Clinton had called him, Nikolai had been the obvious person to contact.

The convoy swung off the Boulevard Ring and descended towards the Moskva river. As usual in winter, the road was barricaded by piles of grimy snow, interspersed with icy pools of slush, blocking access to the pavements beyond. A cluster of parents stamped their feet outside the Institute of Music, waiting to discharge their gifted prodigies once the doors opened. Further on, the red towers of the Kremlin came into view, and they sped across Borovitskaya Square to enter through the Armoury Gates.

As they pulled up in front of an ornate, yellow and white, stuccoed building, Nikolai rushed out to meet them. He was a man of medium height who, in contrast to Leksin, didn't

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look as if he spent too much time in the gym. His usual perma-smile was today looking a little strained.

“Quick!” he urged, yanking the car door open. “We haven’t got much time. The President’s going to fit us in straightaway.”

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Chapter 2

Moscow

In the mellow light of the lounge of the Grand Havana Club, Damchenko slumped back into a cosy, wine-coloured armchair, a Montecristo No 1 in one hand, a glass of cognac in the other. Relaxing for a few seconds, he let the smoke swirl out from below his grey military moustache. Then, with a weary sigh, he reached for the file that Nikolai, his godson, had just sent over.

Alex Leksin, it was headed.

Age: 34. Born in Paris, Leksin was the son of Russian émigré parents who'd moved to London when he was five years old. The man's academic record read like a trophy cabinet: privately educated, he'd gained a top degree in economics at Cambridge followed by a Harvard MBA. So Cambridge, Damchenko reflected, that must be where Nikolai came across him. Personally, when his godson had himself opted to go there, he hadn't approved. What's wrong with our own institutions, he'd asked Nikolai repeatedly, unable to understand his choice. In those days, though, he'd still been based in Tyndersk and the Soviet way of life suited him well enough. Later, after he'd been brought back to Moscow as deputy head of the FSB, his views had relaxed somewhat, and he'd begun to realise that some capitalist traditions had definite merits. He took another sip of vintage cognac.

As he flipped the page, he arched one eyebrow at the next section. While still at Harvard, Leksin had been recruited by MI5, the British intelligence service, to join a new financial forensic unit. Of course Damchenko knew of its formation. His own FSB had considered putting in place a similar structure. Terrorism, drugs, arms smuggling, nowadays they were all multinational businesses – huge budgets, tax-free incomes, money laundering. Britain's MI5 had been among the first of the world's security services to set up a special taskforce to deal with it: people with financial expertise who could read a balance sheet and ask the right questions, able to push hard and take the heat when it inevitably came. So it was little wonder they'd recruited a man with Leksin's background. Nonetheless, the President's choice of an ex-MI5 agent to investigate Ramaz's claim that a planned rebellion in Ingushetia was being financed out of Tyndersk seemed, to say the least, unusual.

Next step had been to Russia as a freelance specialist in corporate crime. Boom-time for Leksin, Damchenko reflected wryly. Talk about choosing the right place at the right time! His eyes widened when he came to Leksin's standard fee terms: one million euros, payable only on success. He glanced through the long list of assignments: an oligarch laundering billions of illegal income; corruption at the heart of Moscow's tax police; a territorial war inside Russia's massive aluminium industry. The list went on . . . Leksin had evidently been a very busy man, and his clients clearly regarded his fee as value for money. But still – 1 million euros. Seemed a bit steep, even by Russia's high standards of excess.

He turned to the section headed 'Personal Qualities'. Karate expert . . . still practised at the FSB's Sokolniki Centre . . . workaholic . . . with exceptional drive . . . pyrophobic . . . His eyes snatched on the last word. An intense fear of fire. An unusual phobia. His lips curled into a slow smile as he concluded that the man wasn't flawless after all.

Next was a photo of Leksin's sister. Beautiful girl, Damchenko thought, studying it closely. A note on the back stated she now lived with her brother.

As he swallowed the last of his cognac, he spluttered when he read the next section. Now this really was a chink. Someone had annotated the margin: 'No action now, archive for future use.' Damchenko smiled appreciatively. The FSB was always thorough, and such foreboding annotations were not uncommon in its files, yet he'd had Leksin marked as an exception. Interesting

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Putting down the file, Damchenko tapped his cigar against the ashtray and absently watched the ash spill. Well, whatever his undoubted gifts, Leksin was going to have his work cut out on this job. Little time remained, and Tyndersk was a very hostile place to be on one's own. Damchenko didn't greatly rate the man's chances of survival, much less finding the link between Tyndersk and the rebels.

He reached forward and picked up Clinton's hand-written notes of his meeting with Ramaz. As he scanned through them once more, his frown deepened. Time and again Ramaz had gone on record opposing any idea of Ingushetia breaking away from Russia. The separatists had known this and gone out of their way to keep him in the dark. So how had Ramaz managed to get such an accurate picture of their plans? He'd refused to divulge his source to Clinton, no surprise there. Yet, Damchenko realised, if he could find out who'd leaked the information, then the situation would be much easier to control.

The melodious chiming of the grandfather clock interrupted his reflections. Five o'clock in Moscow, nine o'clock in Tyndersk. He caught the waiter's eye and motioned for his tab. It was time to get the ball rolling.

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Chapter 3

Moscow

In the Yeltsin days, Maxim Blok had seized his chance in the new free-market environment and hoisted a financial colossus that jettisoned him high into the annual list of the world's richest men. Proud of his wealth, he loved to flaunt his stretched limousine with tinted windows, his private Learjet, his spread-eagled mansion in Peredelkino, once the playground of Soviet moguls, and of course his vast yacht moored on the Riviera. It was his private boast that, while his business rival Abramovich may have bought himself Chelsea football club, the deck of his own yacht was big enough for the team to play on.

His study was on the ground floor of the mansion's separate office wing. The lavish furnishings again attested to his power. The desk was a massive Edwardian mahogany and satinwood bowfront topped with embossed leather, acquired from a private dealer in London. On this rested a picture of a young dark-haired girl, framed in solid gold. The sofas and chairs were custom-made in Milan. An ornate antiquarian map of the Caucasus and a studio portrait of himself and his late wife hung from the oak-panelled walls.

All this, though, was invisible to Blok now as, seated at his desk, he brooded over the Order, signed by President Karpev himself, handed over to him by special messenger earlier that day. It was final confirmation that he had ten days in which to surrender all his shares in Tyndersk Kombinat to the government. After that, he'd lose all control over its operations.

The tall poppy syndrome, Blok called it, the basic human instinct to chop down those who reached up and grabbed success. In this case, it was the men of action, the so-called oligarchs, who had led Russia out of her post-Perestroika economic desert. The President had made no secret of his view that Yeltsin had sold them the family silver far too cheaply, but until now he'd never dared to take them on. However, the global credit crunch had vastly increased public resentment of their excessive, dubiously-obtained wealth and played straight into his hands. Now, keen to salvage his popularity following the controversy of his third presidential election victory, Karpev had declared intention to bring enterprises like Tyndersk Kombinat back under State control so that the people, rather than a few individuals, could benefit from them. Now with the Order, the President had advanced to checkmate.

If the President's speed of action had taken him unawares, the traitor Ramaz spilling the beans to the journalist had the potential to prove catastrophic. Blok of course had been fully aware that Russian intelligence sources were monitoring the build-up of the separatists in his native Ingushetia. But now the authorities had been tipped off about where the money was coming from. Even with this knowledge, he was convinced Russia could not afford to make a pre-emptive strike against his native country, not after the universal outcry at its belligerence in the Ukraine and Georgia. Nevertheless the President had commissioned this Leksin, whoever he might be, to find the source of the funds in Tyndersk and cut them off. Under the circumstances Blok had no choice but to act fast.

Equally worrying, they had an informant in their midst. How else could Ramaz have discovered their plans? But who? Blok frowned as he ran through the possibilities in his mind, but none of them seemed likely. Yet one of them was guilty, and he needed to find out which and sort him out once and for all. Nothing was going to get in the way of independence for his beloved homeland. This had been his aim far too long to elude him now.

Blok's determined jaw jutted forward dangerously as he crushed the presidential order in his gnarled hand and hurled it into the bin. Then he turned his attention to the background material on this man, Leksin, that had been faxed across that afternoon. If anyone thought they could thwart him, they were sadly mistaken. And mistakes had to be paid for.

A resilient flower, the poppy. The more their heads were chopped off, the quicker they sprang back, tougher, prouder and more vigorously than before.

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At an upstairs window in the main wing, the thick drape of the curtains remained drawn, shunning the feeble afternoon sun. Inside in darkness, a slender figure lay cocooned in a pale yellow silk quilt, her long dark hair spread over the soft down pillows.

Anya Blok was a night-owl. Sure enough, as outside the light faded to dusk, she began to stir, pushing aside the quilt and stretching out for her lace-trimmed robe. Switching on the light, she waited for her eyes to focus. Her head felt cloudy, it had been a disturbed sleep with too many things going on in her mind. Pouring coffee from the insulated jug on her dressing-table, she sipped it slowly.

She spotted a handwritten note placed next to the jug and bristled. Another summons from her father to join him and a business guest for dinner. Sometimes she felt like a Fabergé egg, something decorative for her father to show off to his guests and then replace in the cabinet until next required. His antiquated Ingush attitudes constantly precluded her from doing something useful with her own life. A top graduate at Moscow University and probably the most successful ever President of its drama society, she wanted a job like all her friends. Even the chance to pursue an acting career would be better than nothing. Yet despite their endless arguments he wouldn't let her, seeming to take an almost perverse pride in her endless, futile social whirl as if he perceived it as an expression of his own wealth. Deep inside, she knew she was frittering away her life, but what way out did she have? She released the note and watched it fall to the floor.

She glanced at the clock on her dressing-table. Nearly six o'clock. Time to start getting ready. With no enthusiasm, she went into the bathroom, turned on the shower and let her dressing-gown slip off her shoulders.

Leksin was rather glad to find Blok had been called away to the phone shortly before his arrival. With Anya as hostess, he'd been surprised to find himself enjoying her company while they had a drink and waited. Although clearly they kept to small talk, Leksin was interested to find that she was a lot more than the society airhead the tabloids portrayed – and with her large brown eyes, honey-toned complexion and silk dress, she was a lot more attractive too. She spoke in a faintly husky voice, that appealed to him.

The mood altered as soon as her father joined them in the dining-room. It was as if a blanket of hostility had been drawn over the whole situation. Blok's call earlier that day, inviting him to dinner, had taken Leksin by surprise. News of his involvement with Tyndersk had travelled fast, but from which source? Now, he was intrigued to find out what Blok wanted. But so far the conversation wasn't going well.

"This is just theft, plain and simple, dressed up as a business transaction," Blok ranted, his grey-stubbled jowls quivering. "I bought Tyndersk fair and square, and it was me who brought it back from the brink of collapse."

Blok paused as if waiting for Leksin to dispute this, but Leksin was in no mood for semantics. He had heard this theory before and didn't buy it. To his mind, bullying a sick and alcoholic Yeltsin into selling the country's biggest company for a song hardly constituted fair and square. He was keen, though, to move on, but Blok had other ideas.

"That bastard Karpev made one thing clear the moment he first walked into the Kremlin back in 2000. Keep your nose out of politics, he told the business community; if you do that, then you get to keep everything. I took him at his word. In contrast to fools like Khodorkovsky and Berezovsky, I steered clear of politics. Throughout his first and second

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terms I supported his government even though he couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag, and I kept my head down. And look where it's got me?" He glowered at Leksin. "Well?"

Leksin hesitated, weighing his words. He had the feeling he was being deliberately harried and wanted to duck any serious confrontation, however much provoked. He kept his tone neutral. "I have to say, that's not how I see it," he began.

"Don't you?" Blok's eyes glared with chilling translucence as he interrupted. "Don't you? Well, that's no more than I'd expect, Leksin. You're one of them, after all. Contributing nothing and just leeching off the people who make this country work." He thumped his fist down on the table, and the crystal glasses vibrated.

"Father, stop it!" Anya remonstrated, touching his arm. "Mr Leksin's our guest."

His eyes flashed in her direction, for a moment brimming with unconcealed contempt. She returned his stare, daring him to take her on in front of Leksin, and slowly his expression mellowed and he nodded.

"Forgive me, Leksin," he said without sounding like he meant it. He took a deep breath before he resumed. "So tell me this then: what will you be up to in Tyndersk?"

Leksin replied with the official line. "I'm joining the takeover team."

Blok gave a short, bitter laugh. "Surely not, there's already an army of bookkeepers up there. There's more to your involvement than that. What is it?"

Leksin studied Blok's face, searching for something he couldn't find behind his knowing eyes. *You know what I'm after, you old bastard, don't you? Someone's told you, haven't they?* He shrugged and leaned back in his chair.

Blok's deeply-lined face creased further with impatience, his mask broken, and he jumped to his feet, resting a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "I have work to do - look after our guest," he said, emphasising the last word. "Leksin, I'll be seeing you again."

Leksin lowered his head, uncertain whether this was a threat or a command. Either way, he didn't doubt it.

Anya watched her father go, pleased to be given the opportunity to talk to his guest alone again. She was all too used to the spoilt sons of rich New Russians whose chief priority was the acquisition of the latest car or gun, while their fathers traded companies and commodities worth billions of dollars. Leksin was altogether different. As usual at her father's dinner parties, she'd only been there to be looked at, but for once she'd enjoyed herself observing the way this man had coped with her father: in control, focussed and, above all, immovable in the face of his tirade. None of her usual crowd would have had the guts to stand up to such an onslaught. And he was going to Tyndersk. Interesting. To do what, she mused, certain he wouldn't have told her father the whole story.

"Alex - may I call you Alex?" she began, a mischievous tenor to her voice. "My father called you a troubleshooter. Does that mean you make trouble for people or help them out of it?"

Leksin studied her and laughed. He leant forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Sometimes a bit of both."

"And which is it you're going to do for my father? Are you going to make trouble for him?"

"Not guilty. To be honest, I think he's made enough trouble for himself."

Anya's eyes widened slightly, then she gave a playful shrug before continuing. "Are you a leech, as my father says? Do you suck people's blood?"

"Only when I'm thirsty," he replied, gesturing towards his empty glass.

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She laughed and refilled the glass. As he lifted it to his mouth, she studied his face: his dark-lashed eyes, the prominent cheekbones and determined jaw. A bit of an odd mix, but somehow it all seemed to fit together.

Leksin gestured toward the portrait on the far wall. "Your mother?"

Anya nodded.

He got up and moved closer to examine the face of the woman relaxing in an armchair who stared back at him from the canvas. Her long, dark hair hung loosely over an ethnic robe.

"She . . ." His voice dropped off.

". . . died when I was young."

"I'm sorry. Mine too," he said, taking a step back, running his hand over his head. "It's by Rusov, isn't it?"

Anya raised her eyebrows. "Quite the know-all, Alex. A particular interest?"

"Afraid so. I'm a collector. My great-grandfather had a wonderful collection, I'm trying to reassemble it."

"Reassemble it? What happened?"

"He was a Tsarist. He was executed on Trotsky's orders during the revolution, and all his paintings were appropriated. I've managed to buy back about half of them so far." A pause. "You must come over and have a look some time."

Blok had followed his daughter's conversation with Leksin from his study. Now he watched her show Leksin out to his waiting car on the CCTV monitor.

As Leksin's driver jumped out to open the door, she touched his arm and looked up. "I'd love to see your paintings," Blok heard her say. "Honestly. Let me know when I can come over."

Leksin asked for her mobile, then keyed something in.

"That's my number," he told her, his hand brushing hers as he passed it back.

His daughter stood on the porch waving as the car drove through the grounds, then wheeled to return inside. The expression on her face was unmistakable. Blok frowned – he hated complications.

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Chapter 4

Moscow

The car stuttered through Moscow's post-lunch rush hour, then the driver dropped off his passenger before parking in the nearby multi-storey. Inured to killing time in his job, he followed his usual habit of heading for the pool room around the corner.

"How yer doing, mate?" the barman greeted him, looking up from his newspaper. "Have a drink, all the tables are busy at the moment."

The driver frowned. "I'm on duty. Just an orange juice."

The barman banged a glass on the bar and filled it. "Do you want a look?"

He nodded, took the proffered newspaper and crossed to one of the dingy booths lining the far wall. Music blared from an overhead speaker. Catching the barman's eye, he twizzled his fingers for it to be turned down. Then he tapped a Prima from the red and white packet, lit up and spread the newspaper over the table.

A couple came in, ordered a drink and sauntered over to watch the pool tables. For a few minutes they chatted amongst themselves, occasionally breaking off to applaud a good shot, then the man placed a coin on the edge of one of the tables to reserve his turn. His companion slipped away and speed-dialled a number on her mobile.

"Everything ready?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the music. "Good, then put her on the line. I'm going to pass him the phone now."

Casually she sidled over to the driver and took a seat opposite. When he looked up quizzically, she raised a finger to her lips. "Don't say anything," she breathed. "Just listen." She held out her mobile and watched his face contort as he listened.

"W-where are you?" he stuttered anxiously into the mouthpiece.

Before anyone could answer, Nadia snatched the phone away and fixed him in her hunter's eyes. A thin veil of sweat was forming on his brow, and he wiped it with his sleeve. Then he gave her a frightened look that asked what was going on.

"Tell me what I want to know," Nadia said, "and nothing happens to your wife."

The driver's eyes darted around the room, searching for help that wasn't coming, then he shrank back limply into his seat, all resistance gone. "Anything. Just don't hurt her," he pleaded.

"What time are you picking up your boss?"

"Seven."

"From his office?"

The man nodded.

"Alone?"

He shook his head. "The FSB's guarding him."

"How many?"

"Two."

Nadia studied his face for a moment, assessing his veracity, then rested a hand reassuringly upon his. "Thank you," she mouthed.

She looked up and gave a slight nod. A split second later, a thin blade pierced the driver's skull just below the ear, passing into his brain. Murat eased him against the wall as Nadia slipped in next to him and rifled his pockets for the car key.

Outside, she pressed 'Redial'. "OK, we've got it. Kill the woman and join us in the car park."

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A red Daewoo pulled up by the curb near the main entrance of the Moskovskaya Pravda complex. An unprepossessing building of the Soviet era, it was now rather dilapidated with cracks in the masonry and paint peeling from its walls. A golden sign fixed by the door stated that these were the offices of *Novaya Gazeta*, Moscow's bi-weekly newspaper. The driver turned off the engine and waited.

Murat was positioned inside the double doors, holding a copy of the latest edition, his eyes focussed over its top on the lobby. Outside, Nadia studied a weather-beaten poster protesting the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, the anti-government journalist who had worked for the newspaper until she'd been gunned down in the lift of her apartment block.

A GAI, a Moscow traffic warden, tapped on the car window and told the driver to move on. Nadia moved closer as the driver slipped a note into his palm, explaining that he was waiting for his boss. The warden made a show of inspecting his identity papers, then handed them back and tapped the watch on his wrist. "Ten minutes, understand?" he said. "Then I want you gone."

As he walked away, she caught the driver's eye and nodded in acknowledgement before resuming her position.

Two men appeared in the lobby. Murat came out and dropped his newspaper into the bin. Nadia understood the sign and readied herself.

A moment later, the two FSB agents swept outside and surveyed the street, then one of them darted back inside. He re-emerged with another man whom she recognised immediately. As they escorted him to the car, Nadia and Murat moved in. Simultaneously they fired a bullet into the back of each agent's head, shoved their target onto the rear seat and jumped in either side.