

# ***President Lidia***

**A novel by Paul Seabright**

## **President Lidia**

### **Author's note**

This book set mainly in the city of Vilnitz, the capital of a small, unnamed and imaginary country located somewhere in the region that is now known as Central and Eastern Europe. Like all of the real countries in that region, it has been formed over many centuries by the influence of peaceful and warlike migrants and empire-builders from both East and West. Its boundaries have rarely remained unchanged for more than two or three decades at a time, and the country has had an independent national identity for very little of its history. Its historians like to describe it as one of history's corridors, though what the corridor links is no clearer now than to any previous generation. Various readers of this manuscript have suggested that the country's religion is Polish, its architecture Czech, its skullduggery Slovak, its cosmopolitanism Hungarian, its hedonism Bulgarian, its cynicism Romanian, its economics Ukrainian, its generous hospitality and its fractured politics universal. But those familiar with any of these countries will know how superficial such comparisons are. Its official language is a Slav language, rendered everywhere in the manuscript by an idiomatic English translation.

The action of the story begins some three years after the country's emergence from communism, so readers who like navigating precisely with respect to world events may think of it as beginning in late 1992. Others may prefer to be reassured that, apart from one small incident that has been adapted without pretence at fidelity from a real event in a country that also elected a woman president, all the events and people described in this text are entirely imaginary.

# **President Lidia**

## **Chapter 1**

### **Legs**

Monsignor Roman Yuscinski, the cardinal archbishop of Vilnitz, did not consider himself a connoisseur of women's legs. But he knew what he liked - and he certainly did not like the legs he saw ahead on the large advertising hoarding at the top of the hill. It wasn't just the insulting contrast between their impossible grace and his own complaining flesh, which weighed him down as he struggled to make headway against the oncoming wind. No: the insult was collective. He felt it on behalf of all his fellow citizens, even those - especially those - who might not feel the insult on their own behalf at all.

True, it could be said in defence of the legs that at least they didn't move. The archbishop - it was one of the ancient customs of Vilnitz to disdain the title of "Cardinal" - had spent only yesterday a fraught half hour in discussion with a supercilious member of his congregation. The man had demanded to know why the nudity on display in the City Art Gallery should be acceptable to the church while that on offer in the hostess bars around the central station was not. The archbishop had suppressed a testy reply to the effect that anyone who had to ask that question obviously had a shaky grasp of morality to start with. Instead he had invited the man to reflect on the kind of contemplation the two types of nudity were designed to provoke. A raised eyebrow had obliged him hurriedly to expand on this theme, and eventually he had conceded - without feeling entirely comfortable - that nudity in hostess bars would be less offensive to the church if the women in question did not compound their lasciviousness by provocative movements. In retrospect he was not entirely satisfied with this explanation - the more so because of the hint of a smirk it provoked in his interlocutor. But it had brought an awkward interview to a convenient close, and the older the archbishop became the more he appreciated such small victories. And as an explanation of an important but delicate moral distinction, he felt, it might be incomplete but it was true as far as it went.

The legs that now troubled the archbishop were not even directly visible. A large hoarding above the tram stop showed the lower half of a woman's body, draped in a skirt of silky black to just above the ankles, where a pert flash of white stocking could be seen between the skirt and her black high-heeled shoes. But the skirt did not so much cover her legs as embrace them, hugging the form of her thighs and calves and even faithfully transmitting the little raised bump on her outside thigh where the stocking underneath was fastened to her suspender. The archbishop wondered for a moment whether his imagination might not be inventing that last part, before shaking his head sadly and walking on, past the tram stop and the building site and round the curve in the road, bending forward a little against the wind.

It was only three years since the extraordinary events that toppled a government which had seemed set to last for decades. But the changes that had already happened in

that time had brought to the surface some passions that even the archbishop with his long experience of the darker side of human nature had not suspected among his countrymen. A few years ago there had been no advertising hoardings at all. They were hardly necessary when people were used to queueing for everything from potatoes to spare parts for their Russian cars, and frequently to finding the supplies exhausted by the time they reached the head of the queue. It had been natural to expect advertising to arrive with capitalism. But the archbishop (who had always been denied visas to travel abroad and whose experience of capitalism was limited to the descriptions he had read and disbelieved in Marxist-Leninist textbooks at university) had expected advertising to concentrate somehow on the useful. He had hoped that the good sense of his compatriots would fill the commercial breaks on national television with helpful comparisons by real housewives of the qualities of their favourite washing powder against those of some other brand, and fill the street hoardings with practical information about where to find the goods one wished to buy. Instead the television poured out images of young people gyrating to the animal rhythms of modern music, and the hoardings depicted women whose apparently limitless sexual energy found its outlet in cravings to shop. It was all much worse than the most inflamed Marxist-Leninist imagination could ever have foreseen.

It was the women whose reactions he had found hardest to fathom. Rock-solid women who had stood by their husbands for years under the privations and repressions of communism were now abandoning those same men for a job in a bank, a designer suit, a scholarship to study abroad. And there was something so public and garish about it, as though complete strangers thought it proper to address you in the street on the subject of their sexual lives. Of course the archbishop was well used to being addressed by complete strangers on intimate subjects. That was what confession was about. But confession did not take place in the public view, and it took training and a vocation to listen. In the frenzy of modern streets, he felt, confession was everywhere, whether you wanted to hear it or not.

Walking stiffly because of his rheumatism, the archbishop turned right at the traffic lights and followed the little street up towards the castle. The scaffolding had come down from the walls of the Folk Museum, which now looked almost dapper, and decidedly less folkloric than the dilapidated apartment buildings to either side. He turned right again, then immediately left into a small courtyard. A scooter was parked near the foot of a small flight of stone steps. He pressed the bell at the top, and after a few moments was admitted by an ample woman of about sixty, in a grubby white apron.

“How is he?” asked the archbishop when she had closed the door behind him. There was a smell of bleach that overpowered the usual familiar alliance of cabbage, starch and steam.

“Quite low today”.

“Physically, you mean?”

“Not really. Much the same there. The painkillers work, more or less. His breathing’s the hard part. No, I mean his spirits are low”.

“Any special reasons?”

“Well, yes and no. They played parts of a speech by Czernov on the radio. Same old shit”. The woman seemed quite at ease using the profanity in front of an archbishop. “There was some bit about courage. The need to face up to the failures of the past. Rudi always hated Czernov, but you know, he got used to it. You have to when you work with someone. But the bastard has some nerve. You’d think someone as deep in the dirt as Czernov would be more discreet, somehow. Maybe not. Maybe that’s why he got to be president and Rudi didn’t. Anyway, Rudi was really upset. He didn’t say much but he was nearly crying. Except that he couldn’t breathe enough to cry”.

The archbishop clicked his tongue in sympathy. They moved towards the next room, the woman going first, saying brightly as she went through the door: “Look Rudi, I have a man of the church for you! And you such a conscientious atheist too! What disreputable company you do keep!”

There was a fit of coughing from the chair in the corner, where Rudi was sitting, with a light blanket over his knees. Rudi was in his mid sixties but looked at least a decade older. Only a few years ago it had been he who paid discreet visits to the archbishop and not the other way round.

The room had the tired smell of old tobacco smoke. Rudi had stopped smoking now, but the traces of a habit of years still clung to the carpets and the floral curtains. The archbishop sat down in a chair next to him and took his hand.

There was silence for a time. The woman came in, bearing tea and some hard spiced biscuits. “Thank you, Marta”, said the archbishop warmly, clasping her hand. She pulled it away from him, almost coquettishly, before disappearing again into the kitchen. Then the two men exchanged a few remarks, about doctors, about Rudi’s family, about the noise at the weekends from the building site next door. “They get double money to work Sundays”, said Rudi. “So it’s noisy on Sundays because that’s when they work. And it’s noisy during the week, because that’s when they don’t work. They just sing, joke and fool about”.

The archbishop did not mention Czernov. He did not want to provoke another attack. In fact he did not mention politics at all. But after a few minutes Rudi asked suddenly:

“What’s the news about Menskowicz?”

“Oh”, said the archbishop. “I’m afraid he died yesterday. They’d known it would only be a matter of days”.

For the first time that afternoon Rudi looked almost cheerful. For a man who spent much of his diminished life contemplating the triumph of his enemies, it was a rare pleasure to be able to learn of the downfall of his friends. He leaned forward slightly and said to the archbishop in a low voice:

“You know, I always knew he was being blackmailed. I never wanted to say so while he was alive, but now he’s dead...I just hope poor Alena can shake herself free of all that. It will be terrible for her if it all comes out”.

The archbishop looked impassively at him. Rudi had told him his blackmail theory more times than he could remember. And it always came with an added comment about Rudi’s exemplary discretion. He tried to divert him from pursuing this very tedious line.

“Rudi, I know you don’t think much of men of the church, but I’m going to take my calling seriously for once. No more gossip about Menskowitz until he’s safely buried, at least”.

“You are a bore!” said Rudi.

“Oh I know”, said the archbishop with relish. “Such a bore, in fact, that it wouldn’t even cross my mind to tell you any stories about the living”.

“Such as...?”

“Well, there’s a much more serious one. It hasn’t come out in the papers yet but it’s only a matter of time. Were you ever a friend of Markov? The one who’s ambassador in Washington?”

Rudi made a face. “Bastard”, he said.

“You surprise me”, said the archbishop with a grin. “Well, it seems that Markov has been using his position in Washington for some very doubtful purposes. There’s a Russian mafia organisation based in Voronezh that has been trying to set up drug-dealing links in Florida. They can’t use the Russian embassy so they’ve been targeting other minor ones. Markov agreed, apparently. It’s not clear whether they used money or blackmail. He was recalled a few days ago to Vilnitz. Officially for talks, but he’s obviously not going to be sent back”.

Rudi shook his head slowly, trying as always to look like a man whom nothing could astonish. Then, judiciously, he added:

“A bastard, certainly. But I never thought he was that stupid”.

A ginger and white cat pushed open the door and walked over to the archbishop, rubbing itself against his ankles. With the open door came the hint of a smell. Not just the

sweet hair-and-urine whiff of neutered cat: also something the archbishop could not quite place, but had obviously been the occasion for the bleach.

“Did she tell you about Czernov?” asked Rudi. The archbishop nodded resignedly. “I thought the man no longer had the ability to make me feel even sicker than I am. But God, I was wrong. That man will come apart, you know, sooner or later”.

The archbishop was silent, but Rudi needed no further encouragement. “Stop me if I’ve told you this before”, he said in a slightly lowered voice. For a second the archbishop was tempted, but reminded himself that previous experience had shown it would be futile. Rudi launched into a story about the president’s housekeeper and the blackmail ring she ran, trading information with the president in exchange for sexual favours and God alone knew what else. “Can’t say which of them needs the sexual favours more, him or her”, said Rudi, wheezing with laughter. “Who’s the net exporter of information? That’s what I’d like to know!”

It was a story the archbishop had heard many times and in a variety of embellishments. It had once been rather entertaining. Still, in the telling of it Rudi became quite animated. There were many ways of tending the sick.

Marta came in once more, bearing a glass of water and some tablets. Reminded of his invalid status, Rudi began to droop his head again. He then coughed, long and rackingly, after swallowing, so that for a second it seemed the tablets would come up again.

They talked some more, this time about doctors. It was remarkable, really, that Rudi did not talk about doctors and hospitals all the time, like so many of the other invalids the archbishop had visited in his life. Rudi’s egomaniac paranoia had its drawbacks as a wellspring of conversation, but at least it was informed, in its own deranged way, by the world outside.

“Doctor’s mind wasn’t even on the job”, added Rudi sniffily. “He’s screwing the nurse. I can always tell. He was too tired to notice I had a rash”.

He launched into an often-repeated story about the president’s former doctor whose almost complete lack of general medical expertise had been outweighed by an alleged gift for curing impotence in the politically powerful, and that by suggestion alone. “I wish I knew what his suggestions were!” said Rudi with a hoarse laugh. ““Try doing to your mistress what you’re already doing to the country’ – could that have been one of them, do you think?”

The archbishop left, as he always did, feeling that Rudi had almost made a profession of being an invalid. It was a profession he carried off with more grace than had ever characterised his thuggish political career. Between Rudi and Czernov there was frankly little to choose, and the archbishop was too modest to be swayed in his judgment by the fact that only Rudi of the two had ever sought out his company. Journalists had

dubbed the country's political transformation the Velcro Revolution because of the tenacity with which individual members of the old regime had clung to their former power and privileges. Czernov might be preaching different values since the collapse of communism, but his instincts, his character and his power base had changed little in more than three decades.

By the time the archbishop reached his apartments next to the cathedral it was almost dark. People were walking briskly home, or queuing with bulky carrier bags for the trams that would take them out to their cramped apartments in the suburbs. One or two tourists were window-shopping. The expensive café with its New York interior, its waitresses who looked like young men and waiters who looked like young women, was already doing brisk business, in pastries, salads, pizzas – indiscriminately everything. As he crossed the road into Cathedral Square a passing Mercedes drenched his trousers in water from a leaking main. It was more dangerous in the streets nowadays than it used to be, with flash imported cars testing to the limit the dilapidated roads. He limped up the stairs, his shoes squelching, and was troubled to see the apartments in darkness. But then, as he fumbled in his pocket for the key, the lights inside came on as if on cue, and Gabriel swung open the great carved wooden door.

Those who had not met him, but knew the archbishop had a secretary named Gabriel, of fabled competence and discretion, or who had heard on the telephone his rich reassuring baritone, imagined a blond giant, fit to tame a prairie or at least to sing Wotan in a provincial opera house. In fact Gabriel was short, bald, darkly bearded and so severely myopic as to constitute a clinching exhibit in any case to be made against ecclesiastical celibacy. But he had the voice of an archangel, and there were times when the archbishop, unable entirely to ignore Gabriel's music-hall appearance, would simply close his eyes and listen to the man talk. That sonorous and subtle voice, heard from behind the eyelids, only heightened the general impression of omnipresence Gabriel created as he moved quietly about the apartments: short sight had keened his hearing and his sense of space. When the archbishop came through the door Gabriel was ready, helping him take off his coat and handing him a pair of house shoes in a single fluid movement before vanishing to find a dry pair of trousers.

Later the two men sat in his kitchen, each with a large bowl of chicken broth in which floated three or four dumplings. Gabriel had a gift for understanding when the archbishop wanted simple things, and had quietly insisted on this modest supper over the sullen opposition of the housekeeper.

The archbishop recounted his visit to Rudi, and Gabriel in his turn outlined the archbishop's programme for the following day, making it sound a little adventurous while remaining entirely within his competence, exactly as a secretary should. A mass, a visit to a children's home, an interview with an ecclesiastical newspaper, the Cathedral finance committee. Then, when the natural rhythm of their conversation suggested Gabriel was about to withdraw, he hesitated a moment, and said:



“There’s one other thing I wanted to mention. I had a call from Mrs. Liumov today”.

The fact that he did not immediately continue alerted the archbishop to the approach of something serious. He turned an inquiring eye on Gabriel.

“I had the impression she would have preferred not to talk to me. But she did anyway. Liumov has disappeared”.

“How?”

“He didn’t come home from work yesterday. She thought he’d gone out drinking with some friends, but he still hadn’t come home in the morning. And the friend she called said he’d left the office alone”.

“Has she called the police?”

“No”. Gabriel looked a little pained, as though he knew that the archbishop had felt obliged to ask the question, but still resented giving him the inevitable answer.

“Did she say why not?”

“No. But she might tell you. She wanted to know if she could come here this evening. I said I’d call her back later”.

“Of course”, said the archbishop immediately. Then he hesitated. “I mean, yes, obviously I won’t refuse her that. But I’d like to know more. What could have happened? What’s your impression?”

“I don’t really have one. I wouldn’t know”.

The archbishop tilted his head reproachfully to one side at this formulaic denial. There was no subject on which Gabriel lacked an opinion, if he could be persuaded to utter it.

“Personal troubles? A woman?” the archbishop prompted.

Gabriel shook his head slightly. “I don’t think so. Business dealings, I suspect. Mafia, you know. There were stories”. Gabriel heard most stories sooner or later, and usually sooner.

“D’you think he refused to deal with them? Or agreed and then cheated them?”

“Oh, I’m sure he didn’t refuse”, said Gabriel emphatically. “Not many people do nowadays; they can’t afford to. At first, a couple of years ago, some people still thought they could do business without the mafia. You know, they still thought the courts would

protect them, honour their contracts and all that. Not many think that any more. No, I suspect he did a deal and then couldn't deliver. Or wouldn't. The question is whether they're just holding him. Or whether...". He did not finish the sentence.

The archbishop took a deep breath. "Yes, of course I'll see her", he said. "I just hope she doesn't expect too much".

It was late that evening when Mrs. Liumov left. She had come wearing her new fur coat, which made the archbishop feel quite uncomfortable, though it was no secret that unhappy people of all ages and conditions were to be seen entering the archbishop's apartments at one time or another. He was glad he had taken the precaution of asking Gabriel to stay behind in the adjacent office until she left. It was a little hard on Gabriel, since as he had expected the interview accomplished nothing. She did not seem to want spiritual comfort, and she was not prepared to tell him anything that would have enabled him to help in any more practical way. She had flatly refused to inform the police and would not even discuss doing so. She seemed to think the Church to be better - that is to say, worse - connected than it was. She believed the Church could "get things done". The archbishop had felt obliged gently to lower her hopes.

The fur coat, and a little too much perfume, troubled the archbishop again as he closed the door behind her. She was another of those women who had reacted to the new system with what could most charitably be described as a lack of proportion. He thought again of the poster on the hoarding at the top of the hill. In its flamboyance, its vulgarity, it was clearly doing more than simply trying to sell merchandise. It was symbolising a whole social transformation into which it hoped to seduce his fellow-citizens, using modern marketing to disguise the banality of its message and the tired familiarity of its methods. It was making a political and moral assault on his country, thought the archbishop to himself as he fell asleep.

Up on the hill the streets were now silent. There was a little soft rain, which blew gently down over the rooftops and lay glistening on the pavements under the lights. The top right-hand corner of the poster had come unstuck and had folded damply over itself.

The archbishop had thought he was using the language of symbolism, but he was speaking a more literal truth than he recognised. For although no-one could yet know it, that very poster was to be the opening salvo in a nation-wide electoral campaign.

## Chapter 2

### Cats

Over a thousand miles away a jet airliner was flying high in the night sky above the marshlands of south-western Kazakhstan in Central Asia. It was heading from the Aral salt-pan towards Astrakhan where the Volga River spreads out across the delta to ooze into the northern tip of the Caspian Sea. Though its course would later take it directly over Vilnitz it would not land before reaching London. Emilia Karlova was coming home. Or rather, she was going back to Washington, D.C., which could be described as home only because it contained her apartment and every physical thing she owned in the world. She was seated uncomfortably in what called itself First Class. Although hungry, she had declined Genghistan Airways' offer of a late dinner, since she had the impression of recognising its ingredients from her earlier flight in the opposite direction a fortnight ago. She was also cold, and her back ached. She was in a state of resignation: unable to concentrate enough even to glance through a magazine, but certain of the impossibility of sleep.

As so often on these long flights, her thoughts had recoiled into intimacy from the vastness of the landscape below her. In an hour she had travelled as far over the steppe as could have been crossed in a month by caravans bearing silk, spices and tea, or in a week by even the fastest of the Mongols' horsemen. Several million human beings were scattered across the plains, the lights on their habitations visible in their collective immensity to the eye of an airborne traveller no less than to the statisticians of the State Electricity Board. They were engaged in a great social experiment, towards which they felt much as they had felt towards all the great social experiments the past century had inflicted upon them – but which for all their bored skepticism would certainly change their lives and their children's lives forever. In a decade they would travel further than their ancestors had travelled in a millennium. She herself – Emilia Karlova, only daughter of a schoolteacher and a postal worker, owner of the longest pigtails in her primary school, a woman whose heart had not grown since she was twelve even while her brain was growing by degrees, degrees and more degrees – she herself was guiding this experiment, and she sensed that the loftiness of her responsibility called for a corresponding loftiness of thought. But lofty she was not, except pedantically to the extent of 35,000 feet. She was thinking about her friend Lidia's breasts.

It is true that breasts are a subject capable of inspiring art and poetry as well as lust. But her reflections on Lidia's breasts were neither lustful – though they had certainly been so often enough before – nor in the least poetic. She was wondering how long Lidia would manage to resist the pressures for cosmetic surgery to which her career as a model exposed her. Her breasts had always been slightly asymmetric: the left one more pointed, with the nipple turned further out, the right one fuller and at only a slight angle from true. Lidia used to say with a chuckle that her right breast was the one all her lovers made for first, and that she would be fit to model nude only when a large enough sample of lovers showed their attentions to be randomly distributed between the two. Emilia, unusually,

had applied her lips first to the left nipple, provoking a sigh in which pleasure was mixed with surprise. It was a gesture that had prompted a hiatus in their lovemaking while they discussed their physical imperfections in that frank and absorbed way only women can, but with the check against self-loathing that only pride in a lover's presence can assure. It had been a surprisingly equal catalogue, though Lidia was to become internationally famous for her beauty while Emilia would never attract more than the recognition of a certain elegance, an elegance that drew upon a professional poise she had not yet attained in those early days when they were students together in Vilnitz.

Lidia's fame as a model did not rest upon her breasts; after several years on the catwalk she had come to specialise in facial cosmetics and stockings rather than in products destined for the areas in between. This hardly made her immune from the pressures that had made so many of her fellow models succumb to the knife: cosmetic surgery dealt in anxieties, not in objective imperfections. The two most dangerous periods in a model's career were at the very beginning, and again near the end – exactly the times when surgery could be dressed up as the chance of new life. When Lidia had taken her modest portfolio to agencies after her arrival in London, the first two had sent her disdainfully away with a none-too-subtle hint that they might have been prepared to consider her without certain “blemishes”. The second agency even gave her the telephone number of a “highly reputed” clinic. Fortunately Lidia had been philosophical: modelling was not her only skill, and indeed for a time she had almost given it up entirely in favour of her course at the LSE.

But Lidia was now thirty-one. She had begun her career later than most, at the advanced age of twenty-two, but that did not mean she had any assurance of ending it later. Many of her colleagues, friends and rivals from the beginning were now in prostitution or married to solid elderly men, which came to much the same thing except that one traded a little less variety for a little less danger. Emilia had not seen Lidia in over a year, but the length of the absence made her more anxious. Lidia had a way of exuding reassurance when they met that had an entirely unreassuring effect.

Emilia shifted in her seat, awkwardly, aware that others around her were making no movement but were as sleepless as she was. She suddenly remembered with alarm that she had forgotten to notify the Prime Minister's office of the date for her return visit. It was an irritating omission, because it would require her to send faxes of which, on past form, no more than one in ten would even be acknowledged, let alone answered. The Republic of Genghistan was making a curious half-leap towards the third millennium, in which the availability of advanced telecommunications had not overcome the conviction that people were only serious when they spoke to you in person. It was annoying, but it seemed curiously unimportant when set against her reflections about Lidia. Plane flights did that to her.

But her train of thought had been disturbed. She now found herself remembering Karimov, the young minister in the Cabinet Office who had been assigned to her during the visit. He had found it almost impossible to know how to treat her during the first week, alternating between exaggerated gallantry, a studied aversion to noticing her sex

and a kind of hearty joviality that communicated a wish to accept her as *de facto* male. During the second week he had suddenly calmed down and had stopped trying so hard. They had even had a thoroughly cordial drink together one evening, or at least as cordial a drink as you could reasonably expect to have with someone who would go home later to read transcripts of your private telephone calls. He was barely thirty-five and had been educated in Moscow. He was openly impatient with the old men who ruled his country, and whose Russian education was of an earlier, less technocratic vintage. But his openness went only so far: she had already remarked the ease with which he slipped into inconspicuous obsequiousness when in the company of more senior ministers.

She wondered, not for the first time, exactly what he might be looking for in the transcripts. Knowledge of the Bank's intentions, perhaps? These were hardly a secret, since they could be found in any number of solid documents that lay unread on ministry desks; but then, perhaps transcripts were just a less boring way to find out. Material with which to blackmail her? Frankly, she wished there were more of it. She never indulged in sexual adventures when on mission, less as a matter of principle than through simple exhaustion. In any case it was hard to believe that her bisexuality was particularly compromising, even if the rarity of her adventures with men made the tag "bisexual" something of a courtesy term. (It just seemed odd to call "homosexual" a creature who for long periods was hardly ever sexual at all – although, as Lidia had once remarked, that was no odder than calling *homo sapiens* a creature who was hardly ever sapiens.)

More probably, Karimov when reading his transcripts just felt a delicate sense of power. Were the listeners always male, she wondered? It seemed a very masculine thing to do. Or were there banks of female typists, the same bored women who under mature capitalism would be doing telephone sex in eight-hour shifts? Karimov was one of a type she knew well from her own country: an idealist of a kind, an activist with a low frustration threshold (though perhaps that was just another way of saying the same thing). He had thought that political office was about wielding power, power to make changes, power to move minds, power to make factories hum. He was discovering that politicians could make the statistics hum as merrily as they wished, while the factories themselves remained sullenly, eerily silent. What politicians had instead was power over individuals: on a whim he could change the life of his chauffeur, destroy an old schoolfriend, turn an inquisitive journalist into a comfortably rich man. It was not the kind of power he had sought, but he did not disdain it. Foreigners were more dangerous game, especially when they came not to seek favours but to grant them. But to hear these same arrogant foreigners babbling to their lovers, plotting furtively with their accountants or even depressingly monosyllabic with their spouses was to realise with relief how small they were. Emilia had done nothing more ridiculous than to chatter to her eight-year-old niece, but she found herself wishing even that had been done in private.

She started suddenly as a passing stewardess knocked against her knee. It was more in surprise than in pain, but she found herself cursing these clumsy cabin staff, who had been recruited in the days when all you needed was Party connections or experience with a tractor. She looked at her watch, and realised with surprise that she must have been dozing. As so often on waking the strange jaggedness of her half-asleep thoughts came

into focus: she remembered now that Karimov had become mixed up somehow with thoughts of Lidia. She had had a momentary vision of a prison, with row upon row of prisoners seated before a catwalk along which normal people paraded – not particularly beautiful people: short, tall, fat, thin, happy, unhappy. All kinds except that they were free to be normal, not particularly beautiful, short, tall and so on. And a quiet man in a doctor's coat moved around the staring prisoners, whispering to them one by one that corrective surgery was simple, effective and even comparatively inexpensive when you thought of all the benefits. The quiet man looked like Karimov and yet not quite like him – a relative of some kind. Perhaps he *was* Karimov, surgically corrected. And Lidia had appeared behind him, looking haughty, and withering in her contempt for those prisoners who smiled, who seemed impressed, who might perhaps be tempted. Lidia had not noticed Emilia in her corner. And Emilia, not for the first time, had felt very alone. No surgery could correct *that*.

Now the aircraft must be nearly over Vilnitz. Suddenly the memories of the last eight years contracted sharply in her upper stomach. The letter from the Ministry, offering her a scholarship to study abroad. She remembered turning it over suspiciously, in the dim hallway of her parents' little apartment after her father had brought it in from the mailbox. He had thought it a trap of some kind, and had had to be persuaded that it really might indicate a softening on the part of the regime. Then the discovery that Lidia had received the same letter. Only the two of them, star students of their year. The arrival in London: noise, traffic, what seemed to her a kind of creative chaos. Student accommodation at the LSE: everyone else had complained at the squalor, but to her and Lidia it had been luxury. A few months of study, then the political reversal: the hardliners in Vilnitz reasserted control, shot a few demonstrators, cancelled the scholarships, ordered them home. Twenty-four hours of vodka and tears. And then the asylum application. "Asylum": a strange word, and an even stranger reality. Waiting in corridors that smelled of stale paper. Normally, the man at the Home Office had told them with icy disdain, they would not have stood a chance. But as luck would have it, Mrs. Thatcher had made a speech about the flame of freedom only the previous day. There would of course be newspaper interviews, a photo-call. It was lucky too, he almost said, that one of them should have happened to be so, well, photogenic.

Asylum was all very well, but how would they live? The LSE hardship fund had done its best, but they were not the only ones with claims on its largesse. They had both applied for a scholarship to study in America, and Emilia had been successful. Lidia not: being photogenic didn't always help. Emilia to Boston, all snow and wind. Lidia stayed in London, in the gusting rain, eking out a living and falling further and further behind in her studies. Until the Versace contract appeared out of nowhere, and her studies stopped altogether.

The horrible part had been the five years of silence from Emilia's parents. She had written to them from Boston every week, never knowing whether they received her letters, whether they had been punished for her transgressions, whether they hated her for what she had done. It was hard to write letters like that, knowing that each one had to begin as though it was the first, and end as though it was the last. When the news of the

revolution came through, she had caught the first plane. There had been a tearful reunion with Lidia in the Cathedral Square, while students they no longer recognised waved banners, got riotously drunk and hugged complete strangers. From that night she remembered mostly smells: flame, beer, cigarettes, potato soup, the greasy hair of the guitarist, the singed odour of fireworks, the cheesy whiff of his stubbornly limp cock. And Lidia, with her arm round the shoulder of the beautiful young poet, the very sight of whose thin blond beard made Emilia shiver. It had been very cold. The next day, hung over and terrified, she had returned home to find the apartment empty but – to her overwhelming relief - her parents' name still on the door. The neighbours on either side were new, and Emilia did not have the courage to knock on any other doors. She stayed for four hours, huddled in the stairwell that smelled of dogshit; then came back the next day and the next. They stayed away for a week.

But they had returned. They, and the rest of the city of Vilnitz, were right below her now.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was evening in New York, and Lidia was causing small-scale mayhem. Second only to causing large-scale mayhem, it was her favourite occupation, especially at the end of a day on the catwalk being treated by photographers and journalists as purely perambulating meat. And standing between numbers with her arms outstretched, being undressed and dressed again as rapidly and mechanically as if she were a Formula One car at a pitstop. And hearing the men around her (they were nearly all men) referring to her continually in the third person. Now, in relief, she was having some fun.

Her victim for the evening was a loud Congressman from upstate New York. "Lidia, this is Congressman Wilson", Robbie had said. "You have something really important in common, but I bet it'll take you forever to find out what it is!" Then Robbie had given his characteristic high chuckle and disappeared through the throng of guests to the other side of the gallery. Robbie was very excited. It was his first exhibition for three years.

Normally speaking Congressman Steve Wilson would have been sufficiently intrigued by being set a puzzle about himself to have entered with enthusiasm into the spirit of Robbie's challenge. But the fact that the challenge also required him to show interest (even temporarily) in someone else was frankly pushing altruism a little far. On the other hand he had an abundant libido, which an introduction to Lidia was hardly likely to dampen. Lidia for her part recognised Robbie's remark as one of his standard party gambits, uttered with abandon to people about whom he could think of nothing else to say. It was one that had sometimes succeeded in absorbing the most incompatible individuals in a psychological wild-goose chase that extended for hours. And her own libido, though in principle no less abundant the Congressman's, was distinctly dampened

by the Congressman's presence. So their conversation did not get off to an auspicious start.

The Congressman began by announcing that he had just come back from an important visit to Europe. It was a line that sometimes impressed people. Lidia, being from Europe herself, was neutral on the subject. "So whaddaya doin' here?" asked the Congressman. The reply that she was modelling produced an almost audible exhalation from him, as though he could now extinguish the small part of his brain that had hitherto been devoted to making coherent conversation. He could therefore devote his efforts entirely to grinning, touching her lightly and suggestively on the arm, and bragging in a wholly general way about the countries to which he had recently travelled. "Coupla days in Poland" he said. "Hungary, too. Great place, really. Wonderful food. Great women".

"So what did you think of the Polish election results?" asked Lidia.

"Elections?" said the Congressman. "Yeah. Kind of interesting, really. Um, pretty hard to see how it'll work out right now".

"Oh, I think it's pretty clear how it'll work out", said Lidia. "But maybe you're not really interested".

"No, sure I'm interested", said Congressman Wilson. "Yeah, I mean, really interested. Just, you know, maybe 'cause I'm not really from Europe myself. I guess I'm pretty cautious about extrapolating trends. You know".

"Yes, I know", said Lidia mechanically. The time had come to manoeuvre the Congressman round to the other side of the gallery. "Tell me, Congressman, there's something I wanted to ask you. But I'd like to fill up my glass first".

The Congressman took refuge in gallantry. "Yeah, sure, lemme do this for ya". He eased the glass out of her hand, and steered her round towards the drinks table. Just a few yards from her target.

"Thanks", she said, smiling at him broadly. Now to recruit someone else. Fortunately the obnoxious young journalist was passing. It was the work of seconds to touch his arm, make him turn, murmur the word "Congressman", persuade him to join the two of them, slightly rivalrous, men showing off together before a woman, old bull versus young buck. Keep their eyes on you. Back very slowly towards the picture.

"I was just asking the Congressman...", she said. Another winning smile.

"Yes...?" He moved towards her. The journalist moved forward, too.

"I wanted his advice. Maybe you have some thoughts too. I have some investments in Europe. I'd like to know what you both think of the markets there".



The Congressmen kept his eyes fixed on her, but drew in his breath carefully, not entirely able to disguise his annoyance at having to re-engage his brain. The journalist lowered his eyes a second, then raised them again to her, not to be outdone.

Lidia continued to back imperceptibly towards the picture.

“Um, what kind of advice were you thinking of?” asked the Congressman.

“Well”, said Lidia, “you’ve been in Poland recently. You must have some idea of the country’s prospects. Does it make sense to invest there? Are the markets over-valued?”

The Congressman took another step forward. He was trying to compose himself to answer her question. His eyes cast around beside her, behind her, anywhere except directly at her until he had thought of what to say. And then he saw the picture.

It was right in front of him, behind Lidia’s left shoulder.

Robbie had a series of single and group portraits in oils, each placed next to a blown-up photograph of the sitters. The portrait behind Lidia’s shoulder was of a young woman, nude, lying on her back along a couch with her head flung back, lolling over the edge, her far leg raised, her right hand on her own thigh. Behind her, kneeling to the right of the picture, was another woman, half covered in a loose green wraparound dress from which her left breast emerged. The left hand of the woman on the couch was stretched behind her head, gently brushing the other woman’s nipple.

The woman on the couch was Lidia. The photograph of the sitter left no doubt of it.

The Congressman swallowed hard. “The markets?” he said. His voice came out as a croak.

Lidia smiled again. “Yes! I mean, the conventional measures suggest the markets have a long way to rise”. At the word “rise” the Congressman gave a tiny shudder. “But the conventional measures may not mean much in Poland right now. What do you think, Bob?”

The journalist had not yet noticed the picture. But he had noticed that the Congressman was beginning to perspire. “Sure, I guess country risk matters a lot for Poland. Last time I was there....” And his voice tailed off. He now saw what the Congressman had seen.

“Yes?” said Lidia.

Bob looked desperately at her. Better at her than over her shoulder. “Well, yes, I mean, when I was there I thought...um...well, I’m trying to remember when it was, actually. It musta been some time back, come to think of it”.

“And you, Congressman?”

“Yeah”, said the Congressman, breathing heavily. “I can’t remember when I was there either. Musta been some time back, too”.

“I thought you said you were there last week”, said Lidia.

“Last week. Yeah. That’s right”.

“Well!” said Lidia. “The country obviously made a great impression on both of you”.

The Congressman swallowed again. He tried a diversionary tactic.

“You seem pretty well informed about the markets”, he said.

“For a dumb model, you mean?”

“Well, no, I mean, of course not”. He was still trying very hard not to look behind her.

“It’s not very surprising”, she said. “You know, I have to invest my money somewhere. I gotta look after my future. We models have a short shelf life. Almost as short as Congressmen”.

Bob laughed loudly, a bit too loudly. Then stopped himself.

“I guess the Congressman just meant it was surprising you got time to keep up on the markets. With your professional life and everything”.

Lidia smiled. “You don’t have to be wearing clothes to read the Wall Street Journal”, she said. “I always read it in the nude. You should try it some time. And now I really have to go”. She slipped out between them, leaving Bob and the Congressman staring vacantly at each other.

The Congressman caught up with her later. “Say, Lidia”, he said, putting an arm conspiratorially on her shoulder. “Why don’tcha give me your number. I’d be happy to give you some of that advice you asked for”.

Lidia picked his hand off her shoulder and twisted away. She looked straight at him.

“Sure”, she said. “I’ve got it right here”. She handed him a small scrap of paper on which a seven-digit number was written.

“I’m in Manhattan”, she added. “Only I get up real early. Best time to catch me is around seven in the morning. Even earlier is better still”.

The Congressman patted her arm again and moved off smiling. Lidia smiled too. It was not her telephone number. It was Bob’s.

## Intermezzo 2.5

The northernmost of the seven bridges over the river at Vilnitz was the scene of a legendary battle in the closing months of the Second World War, legendary not because of its scale or destructiveness but because three resistance fighters from Vilnitz, armed only with bayonets and hand-made grenades, held a squadron of German machine-gunners at bay in front of the gate-house for twenty-seven terrible hours before fraternal assistance arrived from the advancing Soviet troops. So, at least runs the official government account of the incident. It is an account every child in Vilnitz knows, because it is repeated once a year at the commemoration of the liberation. And also because one of the three resistance fighters was the head of the Communist party in Vilnitz, and went on to become the first president of the Socialist Republic, installed with the same fraternal assistance a few months after the end of the war. An inconvenient detail, remembered now only by a few elderly citizens who have learned better than to dwell upon it, is that the bridge had no gate-house at the time, and had never had one, the present gate-house being a hasty erection made in early 1946 and sand-blasted to look consistent with the date of 1898 carved into its foundation stone. Perhaps it was easier to reconstruct the bridge than to rewrite the Red Army despatches from which the official government account was drawn. Almost no-one knows the reason, and it is considered impolite to ask.

One man who does, because for many years he has made it his business to know such things, is a small man with black hair who is now standing next to this same gate-house looking down into the river. It is just after midnight. He was not born until several years after the end of the war, but he has seen a good number of incidents at this bridge all the same. As a boy he lived beside the canal that runs into the river just downstream from the bridge, and he would often come here to watch the transformation wrought by the dusk on the water's surface, turning it from something clammy and opaque into a dense curtain, coal-black flashed with silver. If the night in general offered an invitation to concealment, nowhere was the invitation more sumptuous than into this bed of ink. The boy was aware that others shared his fascination, for the bridge seemed more crowded at nightfall than at any other time of day. As the night advanced it would empty; before midnight there would be occasional groups of drunkards, after midnight only a soldier or a policeman.

The boy had his own reasons for staying away so late from his mother's home. So he doubtless saw things no-one imagined he might be there to see. Men who lowered packages into boats; women who embraced illicit lovers in the shadow of the gatehouse, people who exchanged consignments not intended for the daytime mail. And, just once, a man who appeared from behind the gatehouse to stand on the parapet of the bridge, before falling feet-first towards the river – until his fall was halted by something invisible, and he swung to and fro for a few seconds above the water. Then a pair of slender hands appeared from behind the gatehouse and drew up the rope until the man crumpled onto the parapet. Not until some years after he saw this did the boy realize that,

even if it did take place in the early hours of the morning, the act had a certain defiance. Its perpetrators (for in his mind they were several, even if he saw only one pair of hands) might appreciate the night's discretion, but if they killed a man in such a place, they could hardly have been very worried about being seen. Young as he was, and disturbed by the vision, the boy was aware of feeling for such people, and for their arrogant nonchalance, something curiously approaching respect.

## Chapter 3

### Posters

The next time the archbishop saw the troublesome legs they troubled him even more. The poster had changed. The long skirt had been removed, and replaced by a tight miniskirt of black leather, at the hem of which could be seen the lace tops of a pair of white stockings, a hint of cool thigh, and – yes, he had not imagined it – the outside suspender fastening. It was three days after he had seen the first poster, and it did not cause his imagination much overwork to realise that matters might not stop there. Indeed, the progression – if that was the right word – from Poster One to Poster Two positively invited speculation about what would and what would not be visible in Poster Three.

He became even more concerned when he realised that identical posters were on display at a large number of points around the city. There was another at the main entrance to the train station, one by the north street leading into Cathedral Square (the one he did not normally use), and one opposite the old Party headquarters. It was not clear to him whether Poster One had been less widely distributed, or whether he was now observing his surroundings with newly-sensitised eyes. At all events, the visual blight he had seen at the top of the hill on the way to visit Rudi was not, it appeared, the isolated work of a single warped mind, but part of a coordinated campaign. To make matters worse, there was no trademark on the poster to indicate what the advertisers were trying to sell. Skirts, perhaps? That was at least marginally reassuring, since it suggested Poster Three would still contain a skirt. Stockings? Less so. Or could it even be...an awful thought struck him, and he tried to put it out of his mind.

The archbishop's emotions were perhaps heightened by his sense that there must be some connection, however obscure, between this shameless display and the lurking moral anarchy into which Mrs Liumov and her husband, and no doubt many others like them, had fallen. She had come to see him again on the day he first saw Poster Two, to thank him for his concern but to tell him that she wished him to take no further action in the matter. Liumov had still not returned; she had still not notified the police; but that was all she would say. He had tried to remonstrate with her – gently, sensing that she would not respond well to pressure – but she had merely looked at him very steadily and said: "The Church has done much to help people overcome crises in their personal lives. It used to be able to do so as of right. Now it must do so by invitation. Thank you for your concern". And then she had left, very assured in her fur coat and her expensive high heels, that he could hear clicking down the staircase and over the flagstones in the courtyard, sounding gradually fainter until they were lost in the low growl of the city beyond.

Even Gabriel, with his legendary capacity for unearthing the truth, was forced to admit over the next few days that he had no idea where Liumov might be. The archbishop was never quite sure in which waters Gabriel trawled for his information; and it was not a question he cared to pose too precisely even to himself. But these waters were certainly barren now. Some people thought Liumov had angered his business associates, others

that he had disappeared to avoid some looming scandal, others again that he had been spying for the Russians. Liumov had been like that, a man who attracted speculation in every sense of the term. Rudi had once confided to the archbishop that he was sure Liumov had been doing dirty work for the President, a suggestion that revealed more about Rudi than about Liumov, but at least showed Liumov to be someone about whom no rumours were thought too far-fetched. In his few dealings with him, the archbishop had always thought Liumov to be rather dull, a self-important little man with contempt for the very world in which he made his money. But then the archbishop had never been in the least tempted by the fashionable tendency to attribute glamour to criminality. Most criminals of his acquaintance were very dull people indeed.

The archbishop had no illusions either about the private habits of President Czernov, but acknowledged that at least his public pronouncements were thoroughly sound. The President's New Year address, and his talk on the feast day of the Blessed Virgin of Baldany, had both been on the theme of "The Moral Character of the Nation", and the archbishop was hopeful that he could be persuaded to take it up again in his next New Year address in a few weeks' time. The President at least understood, in a way that Mrs. Liumov and her like could not, that the people's obsession with such superficial problems as inflation, unemployment and the need to make money – all narrowly materialistic concerns – was distracting them from the real dangers. It was blinding them to the widespread menace of contraception and abortion, and the turning away of young people from their duties to family and to God (or at least, to the Church). Unemployment would come and go, but other losses might be irreversible. Indeed, for a lyrical moment the archbishop even toyed with the idea that inflation was itself no more than the symptom of moral malaise, and that an upright nation would have nothing to fear from inflation whatever happened to such technicalia as the money supply. On reflection that was perhaps a little rash. But on a more general plane, he felt that the lack of self-restraint he saw around him (of which Posters One and Two were such a flagrant advertisement, and Mrs Liumov so coolly unapologetic a devotee) was undoubtedly responsible for a far greater range of social ills than those that met the average journalist's eye.

The archbishop was far from indifferent to these social ills. How could he be, when every day he visited the sick and the elderly, and met the doctors who were trying to keep services running in their crumbling hospitals? It was just that he saw the causes differently. The doctors would complain about resources and budgets, as if some wizardry of accounting could resolve the problem. Budgets were harsh because people were harsh, and the harshness of people was due to the uncritical way in which they had embraced the changes of last three years, adopting every foreign fad as though it could instantly replace the accumulated wisdom of hundreds of years. He had no wish to see communism restored, but he knew there must be a middle way. Czernov for all his faults understood this too.

It was while in the train of just such a reflection that the archbishop first set eyes on Poster Three. It was another three days after seeing Poster Two. The archbishop had just left the rheumatology department at the new private clinic in the suburb of Harlov. Gabriel was holding open for him the door of the car. The archbishop froze. Fifty yards

down the street, on a hoarding fixed at first-floor level to the side of a house, a poster, large as the archbishop himself, showed the same (presumably the same) pair of legs, this time wearing only stockings and a suspender belt, and no other underwear at all. The model was turned sideways to the camera, so that her bare left hip was visible but her pubic hair was not. At least, the archbishop did not think it was, but his eyesight was not perfect. As he squinted at the poster he thought he glimpsed a faint dark line, but perhaps it really was his imagination this time. A glance at Gabriel's thick glasses showed there was no point in asking *him*.

In any case, it hardly mattered. His mind was made up. His resolve was hardened by noticing that at last the advertisers had declared themselves, in a logo at the bottom right hand corner that was the only discreet thing about the whole disgusting parade. *SHEEK*: a brand of French lingerie designed to appeal to the young and impressionable. Even the archbishop had heard of it. "Gabriel", he said, turning to his secretary, who was still loyally holding the car door. "Am I preaching in the Cathedral this Sunday?"

Gabriel nodded assent. "Good", said the archbishop. "Now get in. I want your advice. I need the Press there".

\* \* \* \* \*

When Sunday came it was evident once again how magnificently Gabriel could work. There was a large, expectant congregation. The archbishop spotted correspondents from many of the major papers, and not just the sound ones. There were no cameras, but that would hardly have been seemly, and in any case Gabriel had hinted that all things were possible in their own time.

When the archbishop began to preach his words, as usual, seemed to fill the entire cathedral. He was known as something of an orator, and although he lacked Gabriel's sonority of voice he more than made up for it with rhetorical flourish and a talent for expressive rendition. He talked of moral challenges, of the life attuned to challenge being the only life fit for a free person, of the way that under communism the challenges had come from the abuse of power, but were now of a much more insidious character. They came from the abuse of the self. So far this was relatively familiar territory, but then the archbishop moved on. He wanted to address, he said, the particular challenges of women, and the way in which these challenges threatened to undermine the family, the Church and the nation. He spoke of the families he had met whose unity and harmony had been corrupted, whose daughters had drifted into drug-taking and prostitution. They were not Godless families; they were merely families who had underestimated the challenges, who had made light of the dangers. He spoke of the need for women in particular to serve as the bulwark, of the importance of not allowing distractions outside the home to divert their attentions from their most important task.



The dangers had always been there. Families had always suffered stresses and shocks, he said. But something had changed in these last three years. Families faced these challenges with the support of a consensus, a public acceptance of what was right and what was wrong. Now that very consensus was being challenged. There was nothing new in human weakness. What was new was the celebration of weakness, the pretence that it was better than strength. In the streets of our own city, he said, pausing for emphasis, foreign perverts advertise to the women of our nation that weakness is something to be paraded and displayed. And as he said this, he reached down beside him into the pulpit and pulled out a long cylinder of paper. Unfurling it in a single dramatic gesture in front of the pulpit and then as dramatically snatching it up again and folding it away, he allowed the congregation of St. Stefan's Cathedral to gaze in astonishment for two whole seconds on the vivid charms of Poster Three.

When several hundred individuals in a single building draw in their breath at the same precise instant of time, the effect is not so much heard as felt. It is as though the entire building with its occupants shifts in its foundations for a moment, and the subsequent stillness trembles with surprise. Later accounts from those who had been present differed as to whether the archbishop continued to speak for some time afterwards, or whether he brought his sermon to a brisk close. In any case, nobody much remembered what he actually said. But the attention of the Press, and through them of the nation, was assured.

There was silence – respectful silence, the archbishop hoped – at the end of the sermon, and the congregation looked thoughtful as it filed out of the cathedral into the cold sunshine of the square. Gabriel had arranged a lunch in the episcopal apartments, to which he had invited two newspaper editors (from the *Catholic Banner* and the *Voice of Vilnitz*), the editor of *Alive* (a magazine for women) and a columnist from the reformist newspaper *Pulse*. At the last moment the editor of *Alive* telephoned to say she was unable to come, and the columnist from *Pulse* (who had arrived without a tie) excused himself before the dessert, pleading the recurrence of his gastro-enteritis. But otherwise the lunch passed off splendidly, with enthusiastic support from the two editors for the archbishop's principled stand. The editors, both clubbable men in their fifties, stayed till well into the afternoon, discussing with Gabriel and the archbishop the general problems of moral decline. Then, at four-thirty, the telephone rang. Gabriel, who took the call, allowed a smile to flit across his normally composed features before beckoning to the archbishop and announcing to him that someone from TV1, the country's leading television channel, was on the line.

The archbishop's interview was broadcast that evening. In it he not only denounced Posters One to Three in tones of ascending fervour, but also expanded on his view that those most at risk from this campaign were the nation's women, and those most to blame were foreign corporations. It was seen by far more people than his sermon, even if it lacked some of the latter's magnificent drama. The next day's newspapers all made mention of it, many on the front page, and although there was predictable carping from some, the sound newspapers also gave him firm backing in their editorials. A number of the newspapers also chose to accompany their articles with photographs of Poster Three

rather than photographs of the archbishop, a decision Gabriel thought to be in questionable taste. But overall he was forced to admit that the press reaction had exceeded his most optimistic hopes.

At noon on Monday a press statement was issued from the offices of *Fist*, a small advertising agency in Vilnitz. It read as follows: "Recent statements by the archbishop of Vilnitz concerning our advertising campaign for SHEEK lingerie have suggested that this campaign is the work of a foreign corporation. This assertion is untrue. *Fist* is a wholly-owned domestic company registered in Vilnitz. The advertising campaign was devised and produced by partners and employees of *Fist*. The model whose photograph appears in the campaign is also a national of our country".

When the archbishop was shown the press statement his reaction was that he had never seen a more feeble evasion in his life.

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It was warm in the television studio, and the archbishop hoped his make-up would not run if he perspired under the arc-lights. It was five minutes to seven on Tuesday evening. At seven o'clock the broadcast would begin. It was a popular discussion programme, watched by a large proportion of the country's population over their evening meal. Typically four or five panellists would discuss some issue of the day, with comments and questions invited from a studio audience. The discussion was chaired by Grigor Moratis, who was known to readers of the satirical weekly *Dog Eat Dog* as Rigor Mortis, but whose behaviour suggested a triumphant victory of the life force over the overwhelming indolence of the flesh. He was shaped like a vast pear, and wore crumpled grey suits with bright flapping ties. These looked almost an incitement, as though one pull on the tie would unzip the rest of his dishevelled clothing and bring it tumbling to the floor in a heap around the feet he had not himself seen without the help of a mirror in twenty years. In spite of his bulk, when he left his reinforced chair he could move around the studio with disturbing speed, looming up suddenly on chosen members of the audience like a supertanker in fog.

He also had a great sense of theatre. He had staged some memorable confrontations in his studio, like that between a repentant former secret policeman and the parents of a young dissident he had hounded and who had later died in prison. He was a diligent and ironical cross-questioner, who could make his opening questions sound complicit and amused. The follow-up would then appear as what the ordinary person had been bursting to ask and had been prevented from asking by malice and obfuscation, and the final questions merely world-weary confirmations that the truth was as tortured and disturbing as we could ever possibly have feared.

This evening Grigor had only three guests. Besides the archbishop they consisted of a young reformist parliamentary deputy, known as an enthusiast for the free market,

and a woman journalist in her forties who was social affairs correspondent for the *Voice of Vilnitz*. They had barely had time to shake hands before being shepherded into the studio. As the signal sounded for seven o'clock and the title music for the programme began to play, the archbishop shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He preferred standing to deliver a strongly-felt message, and had a sense that the seating format was designed as much to allow Grigor to dominate the discussion as to make his guests feel at ease.

The title sequence ended, and the small red light lit up on the camera opposite Grigor. "Good evening!" he said in hearty tones. "Tonight we ask the question: is capitalism corrupting our women? The man who has posed this question for us is here in the studio tonight. Monsignor Roman Yuscinski, cardinal archbishop of Vilnitz, astonished the congregation in St. Stefan's Cathedral on Sunday by unveiling a poster he believes to represent a sustained assault on the morality and decency of the women of this country. Archbishop, let me ask you this. Were you willing to risk corrupting your congregation in order to fight the corruption of our country? Is the danger really as bad as that?"

The archbishop realised he was being teased. "My congregation is mature and responsible", he said, with a somewhat forced smile. "But the danger is real. We have made a leap from a system which controlled us closely – too closely – to a system that relies entirely upon our ability to control ourselves. We have not had much practice at doing this in recent years. We can learn, and we will learn. But in the meantime there are powerful interests who have much to gain from tempting us away from this self-control. They want to sell us things. They want to persuade us that the luxuries of foreign countries are more important than the values of our own land. They want to make us believe that sex and glamour are to be pursued even at the expense of our family lives".

"Well", said Grigor with a thoughtful frown, "I wonder if that danger seems as real to other people. Maria Zemeniova, you're the social affairs correspondent of the *Voice of Vilnitz*. Your paper has come out strongly in support of the archbishop's stand. But is this really a problem? Is family life really threatened?"

"Em..well..." said Maria Zemeniova. She looked extremely nervous, which was odd considering that she had a good deal of experience of the television studio. "Yes, it's true in a way that family life is threatened. Family life has been threatened for a long time. It was threatened under communism, you know. So it's threatened now too. So yes, I'd definitely say it's threatened".

"So it's threatened", said Grigor, fractionally raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, yes", added Maria. "It's certainly threatened. But perhaps I would just say that the problems the archbishop refers to...although they're...well...threatening, are perhaps not...not the only...em...threat".

“What’s your view, Mikhal?” asked Grigor suddenly. “Mikhal Antonovich, you’re a parliamentary deputy. You’re a leading reformer and free marketeer. All of this advertising, these foreign imports, it’s good, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, of course it is”, said Mikhal. “Advertising contributes significantly to Gross National Product. It’s one of the thriving sectors of the economy. And imports are a sign that we are able to afford them because of what we’ve already exported. This can only be good news. Personally I’m delighted we can now buy good-quality stockings in this country. It’s not as though our own domestic lingerie cuts much of a dash on world markets, is it?”

Grigor closed his eyes a moment. Vilfab, the huge state-owned underwear firm, was a major source of advertising revenue for his television station. And although in his view their slogan (“The Thighs of the Nation are Safe in Our Hands”) left something to be desired, he could still do without antagonising a major advertiser only five minutes into his programme.

He sought instant revenge. “You buy a lot of these imported stockings, do you Mikhal? For your own use?”

Mikhal looked nonplussed. There was a titter from the studio audience. “Well, no, I mean, my wife buys them. Yes, from time to time”.

Grigor made a mental note to add Mikhal to his list of parliamentary deputies who would be slaughtered by the voters at the next election, a list on which he hoped to make a great deal of money at the betting shop in Stefans Prospekt. He turned back to the archbishop.

“Archbishop, who do you think is responsible for these dangers?”

“Oh well, I think it’s very clear”, said the archbishop, more confident now that his fellow guests visibly posed so little threat. “It’s foreign firms, mainly. Multinational corporations. People who have no understanding of our culture, our traditions. Though of course I don’t deny there may be unscrupulous elements at home as well. But they’re not the main problem”.

“Well now, it’s interesting you should say that, archbishop”, said Grigor. “Because as you know the advertising agency responsible for the campaign you object to so strongly is not a foreign agency at all. Even the model in the pictures was born in Vilnitz.”

The archbishop gave a derisive snort. “That’s what they say. I’d be more likely to believe it if they weren’t all so secretive about it. If she’s so proud of what she does, why won’t she tell us her name? And why won’t she show her face?”

Grigor smiled. His plan was working perfectly. “Actually, archbishop”, he said, beaming, “I have a surprise for you”. He paused for a moment, for effect. The cameras showed a close-up of the archbishop’s face, on which one or two pearls of perspiration were visible.

“Her name is Lidia Maliakova”, continued Grigor, “and she’s here in the studio with us now”.

The cameras zoomed in on the back row of the studio audience. At the left end of the row they showed a woman with dark brown hair, high cheekbones and magnificent dark eyes. She smiled. The cameras cut to the startled expression of the archbishop.

Grigor had already moved across the studio and was at her side. He extended a hand, which she took and stood up. She was a full five centimetres taller than Grigor. There was a small rustle of applause. Still holding her hand, Grigor led her down the steps to the front and onto the platform, where a chair had appeared beside Maria and opposite the archbishop. Lidia smiled around her, first to the audience and then to the guests. Then she sat down, crossing her left leg across her right knee, away from the audience. She was wearing a mid-length black skirt with a slit up the side, which fell casually open so that the lace was just visible at the top of her stocking.

“Well!” said Grigor, sitting down again with a degree of emphasis that might have troubled an unreinforced chair. “Lidia, my dear, you’ve heard what the archbishop has to say. What do you think?”

Camera to Lidia. Close-up. She smiles. “Well, the archbishop believes I’m not prepared to show my face. He’s mistaken. I’m quite happy to do so. And unlike the archbishop, I’m not embarrassed to show the rest of myself either”.

A small tremble of laughter in the audience. Now Grigor is serious. “Yes, but Lidia, the archbishop surely has a point. He says family life is threatened. By the new lifestyles being held out to us from abroad. Surely that’s not a completely imaginary threat?”

“No”, says Lidia. “You’re right. He’s right. It’s not completely imaginary”. She has leaned forward a little in her chair. Her hands are clasped together and her face is animated. “There have been some amazing changes here in the last few years. People’s lives are being put under all sorts of pressures. But, you know, it’s not stockings that are doing that. It’s not pictures of stockings either. And I don’t know if people are having more sex under capitalism than they were under communism. I hope they are, but I wouldn’t know, and it really doesn’t matter. That’s not what’s threatening the family. What matters is people’s jobs. Whether they can earn a decent living. Whether they have decent medical care when they’re sick. If they don’t have those things their families fall apart”.

This time there is a burst of applause from the audience. Camera to the archbishop, who is looking very stern.

“Well, archbishop?” says Grigor.

“With the greatest respect”, begins the archbishop, “the young lady has missed the point. Of course all these other things are putting families under pressure too. But families can survive these pressures if they have a shared sense of values. Those values include such things as loyalty and duty, hard work. What we’re being shown instead in these advertising campaigns we see...everywhere around us...is something quite different. The message is instant gratification. You don’t have to work to be happy. You just spend your family’s money on some piece of foreign finery”.

Lidia’s eyes have narrowed. “For years under communism women were told that their happiness didn’t matter at all. They lived entirely for their families. And for the State. Now the archbishop wants them to go on thinking their happiness doesn’t matter. Well, I don’t think a fine pair of stockings is going to make any woman happy. Not on its own. But it may make her feel flattered. A bit more confident about herself. Even slightly – what should I say – luxurious? Look!”

And Lidia stands up, reaches down her left thigh (the side towards the audience). With a deft flick she opens up the slit in her skirt. Her stocking can now be seen all the way up to the suspender fastener. She holds the position for just a couple of seconds, then straightens up. She walks across to the archbishop. “I can’t tell you how good it feels, archbishop, to have the choice of wearing what you want instead of being told what to wear. Most men don’t understand that. But most women do, and you should be careful before you tell us what’s good for us”.

She has stopped in front of the archbishop. She seems to tower over him, and he leans back fractionally in his chair. He looks hard at her.

“May I ask you a question?” he says.

“You just have”, she answers. “But you may ask me another one”.

The archbishop ignores the barb. “How old are you?”

She draws in her breath. “Thirty-one”, she says. She looks piqued, though whether at the triviality of the question or at having to give an honest answer would be hard to say.

“And are you married?”

“No”.

“Then I submit, young lady – for you are young – that you are in no position to speak for the women of our country, and even less to say what is good for their family lives”.

Camera to Lidia’s face. She first looks astonished, then begins to smile, broadly, happily, as if she can hardly believe the opportunity he has handed her.

She wheels around and walks back to her chair, in the long, loping stride of the catwalk. Then she turns to face him again. “Archbishop”, she says. “I would not presume to ask your age. I shall, however, presume that you are unmarried, unless there’s been some shift in the Church’s position on these matters that may have escaped my attention. It seems to me that neither of us is in a very good position to speak for the women of our country. I speak only for myself, and that’s all I’ve ever sought to do. It would be better if you observed a similar restraint”.

There is a shocked silence in the studio. And now Maria Zemeniova begins to speak. She is trembling.

“Archbishop”, she says with slow emphasis. “Your question to Miss Maliakova was quite unacceptable. Her age and her marital status have nothing to do with the question we are discussing. And in any case, she’s right. She speaks for more of the women of this country than you probably think. But even if she were wrong you should not treat her in this condescending way”.

Camera to the archbishop, who nods sternly. “Very well, I accept that my questions were irrelevant. The fact remains that Miss Maliakova has not answered the main question. She has merely given us a very entertaining display. But the question is a serious one and demands a more serious answer”.

Camera to Grigor, who is beaming happily. This is all going very well indeed.

“Yes she did answer it”, says Maria Zemeniova crossly. “She said that anyone who cares about the family will worry about things like unemployment, and people’s chance of earning a decent living”.

“And will it help unemployment to import French stockings?” asks the archbishop.

“Oh certainly”, says Mikhal suddenly, restored to life again now that the archbishop has suffered an even greater embarrassment than his own. “You see, what people don’t appreciate about the Balance of Payments is that in the long run it always balances. We know that compensating real exchange rate changes - ”

“Thank you, Mikhal” says Grigor brutally. “But I think we’d rather hear Lidia’s answer. Lidia, my dear: what do you say to the archbishop’s question? Will it really help unemployment to import French stockings?”

“No, not really”, says Lidia in a tone of surprise. “Who ever thought it would? But it won’t help unemployment to ban them either. Engaging in futile gestures won’t save a single job. If you want to save jobs you have to think about ways to change the way we work, so we can be proud of what we do. We’ve got to produce high quality goods, the kind the world wants to buy, not the kind of rubbish you offload on people who are too scared to complain. In fact, it’ll probably help to have some good quality foreign goods around. Shows us what the competition is up to”.

The argument continues for several more minutes, while the studio audience watches in continued surprise the spectacle of this woman who appears neither in the least awed by an archbishop, nor even particularly triumphant at his perplexity. Grigor calls the programme to a close, and the archbishop makes a rapid exit without saying goodbye. Soon a number of technicians, producers and others are milling around Lidia, and Grigor comes to take her hand and lead her out of the studio. As she leaves Maria Zemeniova touches her sleeve. Lidia stops and turns around.

“Lidia”, says Maria. “I just wanted to say...em..?”

Lidia smiles brightly at her. “Thank you”, she says.

“No”, says Maria. “I think I may have just, em, lost my job. My proprietor will be very angry. But Yuscinski deserved it. Well done”.

“Thank you”, says Lidia again. “I really appreciated your support”.

“Do you have some time to talk?” asks Maria. Grigor is gently tugging at Lidia’s hand. She looks around her, a bit nonplussed.

“To tell the truth”, says Lidia, “I’d love to talk. But I only got off the plane from New York a couple of hours ago. I’m completely washed out. Call me at the Hotel Victoria. And I mean do, really”.

And Maria watches as Lidia is scooped away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day several newspapers reported the encounter between Lidia and the archbishop in tones the archbishop found painful to read, and there were a number of other reports that Gabriel took care not to bring to his attention. The day after, two papers published the results of an opinion poll, which showed that 65% of men and 85% of women thought the archbishop was wrong to complain about Poster Three. An audience



poll for the television station also revealed that 90% of women viewers (and 70% of men) thought Lidia had been “fully justified” in her remarks to the archbishop. She had become an unexpected celebrity.

This was bad enough news for the archbishop, but worse was to come. At eight-fifteen on Friday morning, shortly after Gabriel had come into the office, the telephone rang. Gabriel answered, and from the gravity of his features the archbishop could tell he was receiving serious news. He made one or two monosyllabic comments, and then, saying “I’ll call you back”, replaced the receiver. He turned to the archbishop.

“It’s Czernov”, he said. “He’s dead. A heart attack”.

The archbishop’s eyes widened. Then Gabriel continued.

“And it’s not just that. He didn’t die in his sleep. He...” Gabriel paused... “He died while making love to his housekeeper”.

The archbishop had been party to the news of many deaths in awkward circumstances. But even he could not be entirely unmoved to hear this about the President of the Republic. His chin sagged visibly.

“There’s no chance they can hush it up, either”, said Gabriel. “I don’t think Czernov was very popular among his staff. Anyway, whatever the reason, it seems that the first journalists arrived at the palace only four minutes after the ambulance”.

The archbishop was silent. He could hardly claim to have been fond of Czernov, nor even in the least to have liked him. But whichever way he considered the matter, this was not welcome news.

### Intermezzo 3.5

“Konstantin!”

The woman’s cry echoes through the back yard of the apartment building.

“Konstantin!”

An acid, irritated tone, as if the hoarseness in her voice from screaming at him were his fault too. Across the street, at the edge of the canal, the boy winces slightly (it is a tiny movement of the facial muscles that he makes so often as to be scarcely aware of doing so). He picks himself up wearily – it’s humiliating, but there’s only so much you can do to fight it – and makes his way through the archway into the back yard.

As he enters the dingy hallway and places a foot unwillingly on the staircase he hears her cry again. The tone so familiar that he pays it no attention, but this time as it fades he catches something strange at the end, a little hiccup almost. A sob? He has never seen his mother cry, so it is hard to believe. She is a vast implacable woman whom he cannot imagine behaving like a little girl. Another lilting sound, that could be weeping or singing except that song is even harder to imagine than tears. Something very strange is happening. He stops, telling himself it is to listen more carefully, but knowing that his reluctance to climb the stairs is ten times heavier now that he no longer knows what awaits him at the top.

Many times in the years to come he will re-live this climb. Everything in his culture tells him that a moment like this should bring the most joyous emotion that a boy can experience. None of the self-appointed guardians of right thinking and feeling can have had any experience of *this*. As he reaches the top and halts he hears a sound – the creak of a pair of boots behind the door. A smell of tobacco and sweat. Another sound – the flapping of a leather belt, whose softness only enhances its menace when remembered over the decades.

He waits before the door, uncertain whether to go in. It swings open slowly as he stands there.

“Konstantin”, says his mother quietly, with a slight crack in her voice. “Come here. This is your father”.

## Chapter 4

### Breakfasts

For Lidia the week of the television programme had passed in a blur. She had been making breakfast in her apartment in New York on Monday morning when Grigor called. It was mid-afternoon in Vilnitz, and she had promised him an answer by 8 p.m. his time. It took her a couple of hours to make up her mind, and there followed a frantic afternoon of telephone calls, cancelling and postponing engagements, so she was left with very little time to pack before making her way out to Kennedy airport. A rough night flight, but she was used to them. In the modelling profession it was the rule that photographers travelled business or first class, while all but the supermodels travelled economy, even though they were the ones who had to look fresh at the other end. She was adept at ingenious excuses for an upgrade (she had in her time pleaded epilepsy, posed as an ambassador's wife, and given the impression of unintentionally revealing herself to be an undercover inspector for the Federal Aviation Authority). But this time the flight was packed, so she shared a bulkhead with a vomiting infant and a teenage computer freak. Changing planes in London. Three hours' wait for the connection to Vilnitz, then no more than an hour to rest in her hotel before the car arrived to take her to the studio.

She had managed to extricate herself from Grigor and his entourage soon after the end of the broadcast, pleading exhaustion. A young cameraman called Vladimir had arranged and supervised her return to the hotel with a self-effacing efficiency that contrasted agreeably with the loud style of the studio. The next day the telephone began to shrill in her hotel room soon after eight, and it was not until it had sounded again four times in twenty minutes that she gave instructions to the switchboard not to put any more calls through. Lunch with the people from *Fist*, who were whooping with delight at the favourable publicity and wanted to discuss a series of follow-ups, a suggestion to which Lidia felt entirely incapable of devoting any constructive thought. She gave another television interview that evening, at the same studio but for a news programme, with Vladimir behind the camera and the questioning conducted by an unsmiling young man who seemed determined not to allow the conversation to be tainted by any hint of charm.

By the time Friday came she had completely lost track of the people she had talked to and, worse, the promises she had unwittingly given. People who had exchanged a few words with her would telephone the next day to remind her of some remark they had interpreted as an undertaking, and demanding to know when they could meet her again to follow the matter up.

She had lunch on Friday with Maria Zemeniova, at a small restaurant serving pizzas not far from Cathedral Square. Maria had indeed lost her job with the newspaper on the morning after Lidia's confrontation with the archbishop. But it had been as abruptly restored when the first results came through of the poll of viewers, leading the editor of the *Voice of Vilnitz* hastily to reconsider his position on stockings (though not,

added Maria wearily, on anything really important). It was surprisingly warm for late November, and after lunch they walked around the square and away into the old town for half an hour, each of them seeking to prolong the moment against the hectic demands of the coming afternoon. The smell of bread and damp laundry clung to the streets. Naturally they spent some time talking about Czernov. The state radio bulletins had reported his death in a minimalist fashion, but already an evening paper had appeared with sketchy though still sensational details. Maria was able, if not to confirm them, at least to strengthen rumour with rumour. It was said the president's housekeeper had been unable to raise the alarm, since she had been tied to the bed and gagged with her own stockings; she had therefore had no choice but to wait under the slowly cooling corpse until one of the servants arrived in the morning. The president's wife and teenage daughter had been away at the time; they were thought to be very devout; this would shock them terribly; and so forth on and so on.

"I hope at least the stockings were SHEEK", said Lidia. "I'd like to feel I'd done some good in my life".

"If you'd seen the housekeeper you wouldn't think that very likely", said Maria.

"So who takes over from Czernov?" asked Lidia.

"You mean in attending to his housekeeper?"

"You know what I mean".

"The funny thing is", said Maria, "I don't know. Obviously for the Prime Minister there are all sorts of rules of succession, since he wields real power. But I guess when they wrote the constitution nearly three years ago it didn't occur to them to worry about the succession to the Head of State. Maybe the government can nominate a caretaker till they have an election. I'm not sure".

"How does this story affect you?" asked Lidia.

"Oh, dramatically", said Maria. "I shan't have much rest for the next few days. I don't cover the story itself. But I have to monitor people's reactions. That'll be the really interesting bit. I don't think people liked Czernov much. But they respected him. Sort of. I mean, people who didn't know him respected him, because he talked a lot about responsibility and morality and so on. That's why it'll be fun to see what they make of all this".

"I'm flattered you should still be able to spend time having lunch with me", said Lidia.

Maria laughed. "Oh, you're a celebrity now. In fact, in order to justify this lunch to my editor I have to ask you whether you have any comment on Czernov's death".

They had just rounded the corner of a small street and were walking past a vegetable store. Lidia stopped and looked at Maria, frowning.

“What do you mean?”

Maria looked back at her, unblinking. “What I just said. Do you have any comment?”

“No!” said Lidia crossly. And then, after a moment’s thought: “Is the rest of this conversation on the record too?”

Maria smiled, a little sadly, as though she felt Lidia still had much to learn. “No”, she said, after a short pause. “No, it isn’t”. Then, as an afterthought: “It never was. Don’t worry”.

Lidia still looked startled. They had not moved from the vegetable store. Maria put out her hand to touch Lidia on the upper arm. “I’m sorry”, she said. “We must seem very provincial to you, after New York. It’s just that, you know, you’ve become suddenly rather important to us. Much more important than we are to you. I shan’t be able to go back to the office without everyone wanting to know about you. What you said. What you thought. And, of course, I’m afraid, what you wore. I shan’t tell them much, of course. But, you see, I have to have a line. Something to say to them”.

Lidia smiled. “Yes, I see. Don’t worry”. She put her hand over Maria’s.

“You’ll probably be very glad to leave”.

“Yes, probably”, said Lidia.

“When are you going?”

“Sunday”.

“Well, do come back soon”.

The two women said goodbye at the top of Stefans Prospekt. They embraced warmly, and Maria watched as Lidia walked confidently down the broad street towards the Cathedral. It was strange to envy this young woman and to feel frightened for her at the same time.

At three o’clock the following morning the telephone rang in Lidia’s hotel room. After seven rings she picked up the receiver.

“Lidia, it’s Grigor”.

“How dare you call me at this time?”

“Lidia, it’s important”.

“Fuck off, Grigor”.

“No, I mean it. It really is important”.

“You said that last night. Now fuck off”.

The previous night Lidia had had to devote some energy – much more than she wanted to devote – to fending off the attentions of Grigor after an already lengthy evening in a restaurant and at a nightclub. She was in no mood to renew the negotiations.

“No listen”, he said, with a tone of desperation in his voice. “This has nothing to do with last night. It’s about Czernov”.

“I don’t give a shit about Czernov”.

“I know you don’t”, said Grigor. “But I have something to tell you, and something to ask you. And it can’t wait. You’ll see why”.

Lidia took a deep breath. “Grigor, it’ll have to wait. Anything you ask me now will get the most hostile reception you can imagine. If you want to ask me something, we can meet in the morning. Believe me, you’ll prefer it that way”.

Grigor was silent, but not for long. “All right”, he said. “Breakfast”.

“Eight o’clock. Here”, said Lidia. “I’m leaving at nine-thirty to see my mother. And your story had better be good. If it isn’t I’ll never speak to you again”.

“It will be”, said Grigor, and rang off.

Lidia put the telephone down with a weary sigh. She turned back towards the other side of the bed and ran her hand down Vladimir’s chest, kneading gently on his stomach and then closing her fingers round his penis, now lying limp against his thigh.

“I’m sorry”, she said.

He smiled. “Hardly your fault”, he said. “I suppose we’re all competing for your favours”.

Lidia laughed out loud. “I’m glad to say you and Grigor are not even in the same race”.

“Come here”, she added, with a soft, almost pleading quality in her voice that was the first she had permitted herself that evening – or, for that matter, in quite a long time.

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It was one minute past eight when Grigor called again, from the lobby. He did not like to be kept waiting. Because he did not like to be kept waiting, Lidia took her time. She was quite capable of punctuality, but was still furious at him for the presumption of his call. She collected together in a large canvas bag the things she wanted to take to her mother. She quickly tidied some of the more unseemly mess in the room. Vladimir had left at four o'clock, at her request.

It was eight twenty-five by the time she and Grigor sat down at a table by the window overlooking the atrium of this expensive modern hotel. It stood on the site of the former secret police headquarters: a small statue in the street outside marked the spot where a lone demonstrator had been shot a decade earlier while holding a vigil for his imprisoned brother. Sale of the site to a foreign hotel chain after the revolution had served the twin purposes of symbolically ridding Vilnitz of its hated icon of oppression, and allowing the secret police to afford the move to more spacious and expensively equipped premises just across the river. The hotel had now been open a couple of months, and had already become a fashionable meeting-place, as well as the source of the only good cup of coffee available in the city.

Having sat down, they immediately had to stand up again to help themselves at the breakfast buffet. Grigor was making a Herculean if not entirely successful attempt to hide his impatience. It amused Lidia to see him like this; in his professional life (unlike his private life) he at least knew in principle the virtues of the gradual approach, however hard he found it to apply in practice.

As soon as they had sat down for the second time, Grigor began. "Lidia, did you see the eight o'clock news last night?"

She nodded. The programme in question had given a surprisingly frank account of the circumstances of Czernov's death.

"Well", continued Grigor. "You can imagine that something like that didn't happen without a huge internal fight. The place is in an uproar. The old guard were horrified at the idea. Not the job of state t.v. to peddle scandal. Our job is to report the news. And so on. As if this stuff wasn't news! In the end what did it was knowing that everyone on the streets outside had heard the story already. We'd have looked ridiculous if we didn't mention it".

"Yes", said Lidia. "And this was what you wanted to tell me at three o'clock this morning?"

“I’m coming to that”, said Grigor. “Anyway, the first signs are that the public reaction is very strong. We took a poll after the broadcast last night. Massive outrage. Hypocritical old bastard. Lecturing to us about the family and moral responsibility, and all the time he was into S & M with that old bag. You can imagine the sort of thing”.

“Mmm”.

“Well. Women seem to be particularly outraged. Not just at him, either. At the government in general, and at the Church. The poll asked three questions which got over 80% of women saying ‘yes’. The first was ‘Do you think the government has too much control over people’s lives?’. The second was ‘Do you think the Church has too much control over people’s lives?’. And the third was ‘Do you think men have too much control over women’s lives?’”. There’s something else interesting about it too. Normally the answers to questions like that vary a lot according to people’s other political beliefs. But this time they don’t. It’s across the board. About the only thing’s it’s linked to is age: young women are a bit more likely to say ‘yes’ than older ones. But otherwise it’s amazingly unanimous”.

Grigor paused for breath. Lidia looked impassive. As if to forestall another question about why he was telling her all this, he plunged on.

“Okay. So this is where you come in. Some of us feel...I feel...that this is a big moment for the country. We need to talk openly about what it means. For women especially, but for men as well. So I’ve got agreement from the Controller of Programmes to do a set of three special shows. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday next week. After that, who knows? I chair them. But I take more of a back seat than usual. Instead I get two anchor people – one man, one woman – to come on all three. Each of these people invites a different set of guests. Witnesses, if you like. The first programme is about politics. The second about economics. The third about women. I mean, they’ll all be about women, indirectly, but the third will tackle it explicitly. Anyway, I want you as one of my anchors”.

Lidia looked at him for a moment before answering. “I can’t. I’m going home tomorrow”.

“Change your flight”.

“No”.

Grigor looked pained. People did not often turn him down, professionally at least. But he did not often deal with someone like Lidia, and he was treading carefully.

“Lidia, this is your country. And it’s passing through interesting times. Maybe sixty per cent of the population could watch these shows”.

Lidia sighed. “Is it really still my country? I left it a long time ago”.



“Lidia, we all left it a long time ago. We all feel like we’re living in a foreign country now. At least that’s an experience you already know how to handle”.

“I have no training in t.v. I’m an amateur”

“I don’t want someone with training in t.v. We have lots of them, and they’re all naïve. Look, it’s difficult to say this, and I’m not apologising for us. But, you know, our t.v. and our papers are so small-minded. When you came on the show the other evening you were like a gust of fresh air. You’re a professional. Maybe you’re not our kind of professional. But that’s why you’re exactly what I need”.

Lidia avoided catching his eye. “You’re an accomplished flatterer”, she said. “But if you want an answer right away, it has to be ‘no’”.

“And if I can wait?”

She said nothing for a moment. “I can tell you tonight”, she said. “I’m spending today with my mother”.

She agreed to let him give her a lift to the station. As he manoeuvred his enormous bulk across the lobby of the hotel, Grigor winked happily at the receptionist.

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Lidia’s mother lived in Turnow, a small town about an hour away from Vilnitz by train. Lidia settled herself into a first-class carriage, and began to read. It took about five minutes for the train to pull through the tatty suburbs of Vilnitz and into the open plain. The railway ran alongside the main Vilnitz-Turnow road, a potholed stretch of single carriageway dotted with small farms. From time to time there was an advertising hoarding, creaking in the breeze: no stockings here, merely advertisements for fertiliser and milking machinery. Not many foreign cars on this road either: the usual mix of Russian Ladas and the local AutoVils, and from time to time a tractor or a farmer’s horse-drawn cart.

The AutoVil was known popularly as the Maneater because of the frequency with which one saw it immobilised by the roadside with the driver’s torso and legs sticking out from under the hood. It was the fruit of a disastrous mechanical enthusiasm on the part of the son of the country’s president in the early 1970s. His father had persuaded President Brezhnev that his son’s genius as an inventor, allied to an abundance of local engineering talent, could complement the Russians’ dominance in small cars, and had accordingly received Russian approval for a large manufacturing plant outside Vilnitz. The son’s inspiration consisted in taking a small engine and placing it inside a large car, and the measure of his country’s gratitude could be seen in the stock of jokes that circulated for

the next twenty years (sample: “Why does a new Autovil cost more without delivery? That way you can have it repaired on the spot”). Brezhnev thought the Autovil a miracle, since at a stroke it made the Lada seem both sophisticated and dependable. When in difficult negotiations with satellite states he had only to hint that their allocation of Autovils would be increased for them to become magically quiescent without any need for vulgar sabre-rattling. He had even flirted with the idea of sending Autovils rather than soldiers into Afghanistan in 1979. When Lidia was a student she had spent much time under the hood of an Autovil belonging to a boyfriend, an apprenticeship that had made her capable since then of fixing virtually any mechanical defect without professional assistance.

At least when trains stopped it was not usually to allow the driver to mess around under the engine-hood. This train stopped three times on the way to Turnow, and at the second stop an elderly couple came into Lidia’s compartment. From the awkward air with which they pretended not to look at her during the journey, she could tell they had recognised her. She was too tired to be sociable, although they looked pleasant enough, so she was glad they kept their curiosity to themselves. At the station in Turnow she took a bus, once again noticing some curious glances, though whether these were prompted by more than her evidently foreign and expensive clothes was harder to tell. It was a ten-minute ride to her mother’s apartment.

As usual her mother had left the door on the latch and was seated on her battered sofa smoking a cigarette. Lidia sat down beside her and gave her a silent hug. Before saying anything she felt in her bag and drew out a long box of expensive American cigarettes. It had become a ritual between them since the first time Lidia had returned after the revolution, to find her mother a widow and radiantly happy to be so. Since then the apartment had been liberated of the traces of male habitation: no more pipe smoke, no more vests drying over the bath, no more muddy boots by the door. It now had an almost bohemian air that contrasted oddly with the stocky ordinariness of the building and its remaining inhabitants.

Lidia’s mother Tatiana had spent most of her adult life as a mathematics teacher at the local high school, where her intellectual and pedagogic gifts had made her the idol of several generations of students who went on to university in Vilnitz or sometimes even in Moscow. She had worn out three husbands, emotionally or physically or in one case both. She was deeply cynical about her students’ worldly success, recognising that those who won the highest honours were far from always those whose gifts she herself most admired. She adored her daughter without being very much impressed by her, a combination Lidia found reassuring and terrifying by turns.

“I’m told you’re famous”, she said.

Lidia smiled. “Only for my legs”, she replied.

“Oh that’s all right, then”, said Tatiana. “I was afraid it might go to your head”.

They did not discuss the reason for Lidia's return to Vilnitz until late in the afternoon. After a light lunch they had walked in turn through the three parks in Turnow, while Tatiana described her current favourite students with the same critical indulgence that always made Lidia feel part of a strange extended family. For at least the past decade Tatiana's friends had been, on average, notably younger than Lidia's. In a country built upon inherited structures of authority, Tatiana seemed to move with a puzzled indifference to age and rank. Since her move to America, Lidia found this even more remarkable than before; American informality, by contrast, seemed so deliberate and forced.

"So what about you? They want you back now?" asked Tatiana suddenly. The two women had linked arms and were watching a pair of ducks fight over some scraps of bread.

"I don't know about that", said Lidia. "I've done a programme for someone, that's all. I may do a couple more. But that's it".

"Still, you've stopped an archbishop in his tracks. That's something to be pleased about", said Tatiana. "I tried to seduce one, once. I was only eighteen, and I failed miserably. Glad to know you've carried on the good work".

"I didn't seduce him", pointed out Lidia, with what seemed like a pedantic insistence on detail. "I didn't even try".

"There's still time", said her mother thoughtfully. "But does it mean...?"

She stopped. Lidia knew what she wanted to ask. She also knew that her mother's pride made it an almost impossible question to utter. Never in a decade had Tatiana reproached her daughter with her decision to settle abroad, though for more than half of that time she had fully expected never to see Lidia again.

"I don't know what it means", said Lidia. "Everything here has changed so fast. In some ways I'd love to come back. But, honestly, I have no idea what I could do here. I've lost my familiarity with the place, somehow".

There was silence for a moment. Then Lidia spoke again: she found this silence hard.

"It's been three years", she said, "and you still haven't come to New York. Before I leave I want us to fix a date".

They did this every time. It was another of their rituals.

It had started to rain by the time Lidia returned to the hotel Victoria. Vilnitz looked lost in the dark. Tempted though she was to wait until three a.m. before calling Grigor, she was exhausted. She was relieved that he did not pick up the telephone.

Instead she left her message on an answering machine that hissed like an Autovil in the early stages of engine failure.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shows were by every journalistic standard a great success. The size of their audience broke all previous records for current affairs programmes. (All, that is, except for the famous debate on economic reform the year before with a visiting junior minister from Britain called Roy George, who through a misprint in the schedules had been confused with the pop singer Boy George). And Grigor's trilogy, as it came to be known, even achieved the unusual feat of increasing its audience substantially through the series. Lidia and her counterpart anchor, a well-known actor and playwright called Ivan Riulov, achieved an excellent rapport, trading enough banter to lighten the discussion without obscuring its direction. Their guests were a stimulating mixture of the perceptive and the pompous, and there was enough fierce argument to add spice to the shows without offending those who might have been sickened by blood sports. Lidia's bag of fan mail on the morning after the second show was so vast that, if placed on a chair in a dim light, it could have been mistaken for Grigor. And an opinion poll published the following Saturday in the Voice of Vilnitz revealed that the nation's favourite candidate to replace the deceased President Czernov was the model and broadcaster Lidia Maliakova.

Lidia thought the news a wonderful joke, and on the Saturday evening bought champagne for Grigor, Ivan and a group of friends from the studio. But by Monday it was a joke no longer.

At eight o'clock on Monday morning, Grigor was seated at a table for six, set some distance apart from the others in the breakfast room of the Hotel Victoria. Facing him were Maria Zemeniova and a man called Pavel Mankov. Beside him was Ivan Riulov. They were waiting for Lidia.

She arrived at five past eight. She had been expecting to see Grigor "and a couple of friends". When she saw the group at the table she stopped, and gave a slight frown.

"Good morning, Lidia", said Grigor expansively. "Sit down". He indicated a chair beside him.

"Grigor, you fuckhead", said Lidia. "That's the second time you've called me at three o'clock in the morning. It's also the last".

Grigor smiled broadly and gave a stage shrug. "What can I do? It's when I have my best ideas".

"Next time you keep them to yourself. I'm serious".

“You’ve got to admit my last idea was quite a success. And wait till you hear this one”.

She sat down, and looked warily around her. “This is quite a reception committee”.

“Oh yes”, said Grigor. “Let me introduce Pavel Mankov. He’s campaign organiser for the Democratic Forum”.

Democratic Forum was a small liberal party that had briefly belonged to the governing coalition after the first free elections. It had left the coalition in protest over the government’s acceptance of a Catholic Action Party clause severely restricting contraceptive sales that had been added to the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill during its committee stage. Now it kept up a vigorous opposition to the government’s social policy while being broadly supportive of the economic reform programme. Lidia had heard of Pavel, who had a reputation as a formidable campaign strategist.

Lidia and Pavel shook hands. “I’ll just go and get my breakfast”, she said.

When she had sat down again Grigor said: “Let me come straight to the point”.

Lidia nodded.

“As you know, nominations for the Presidential election close this coming Friday. We’d like you to stand”.

Lidia looked at him in silence for a moment, and then grinned. “Where’s the hidden camera?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Grigor looked surprised.

“The hidden camera. The one that’s filming me to see if I’ll fall for your joke”.

“Lidia, it’s not a joke”.

She began to giggle. “You must think I’m a really dumb broad”.

“Lidia. It’s not a joke”, said Grigor again. Lidia continued laughing, then realised gradually that no-one else was doing so. She composed herself, and looked with mock seriousness at Grigor.

“Actually, Grigor”, she said. “It’s funny you should mention it. I was just about to offer you a job on the catwalk”.

“Save the jokes for your election speech”, said Grigor. “I wouldn’t have wasted Pavel’s time if all I wanted was to play a trick on you. He has better things to do. Now listen, and don’t say anything till I’ve finished”.

And Grigor outlined his plan. Lidia would be a joint candidate of the Democratic Forum and Citizen’s Voice, a centrist party that was still in the government coalition. There were rumours that the right-wing parties were going to put up a solid technocrat, a political ally of Czernov but without his moralising streak. The ex-Communists were likely to campaign on a platform of moderating the excesses of economic reform, but it was not known who their candidate would be. Lidia’s strength, apart from her popularity in the country, was precisely her absence of political attachments. The post of President was not an executive post, so her ability to be above the political battle would be a great advantage over the others, who all came hopelessly compromised by their existing loyalties. As a young, dynamic woman she would symbolise the modernising, forward-looking face of the country. And the backlash against the conservatives and the Church created by Czernov’s death would give a natural advantage to someone who had come to the nation’s attention for her plain speaking and lack of humbug.

“One other thing”, concluded Grigor. “Nobody thought carefully about it when they were drafting the constitution. But it seems that whoever wins this election will only be able to stay to the end of Czernov’s four-year term. The presidential terms are in fixed four-year blocks, not in periods of four years from the date of the election. That means another election in eighteen months’ time. In a way, that’s good news for you. It means the voters may be willing to take more of a chance on a fresh face. And it also means that if you can’t stand the job, you can always pack it in pretty soon”.

Lidia listened carefully. When he stopped she looked closely at the faces around her. “I see the point of the strategy”, she said. “What I don’t understand is why it should be me. Everything else you say applies to Ivan, for example. Except the woman bit”.

Ivan grinned. “The country’s number one priority is inward Japanese investment”, he said. “You couldn’t have a president with a name like Riulov; they’d never be able to pronounce it”.

“Ridia Mariakova’s not much better”, said Lidia. “A serious answer, please”.

Grigor was about to speak, then looked at Maria. She spoke for the first time. “Actually, Lidia, I think the woman bit, as you call it, is important. You’ve seen the polls in the last few days. And also, you’ve made the point yourself. Women in this country are tired of being pushed around. And the rest of the world sees us as some kind of medieval theocracy that’s still burning witches. You could change all that”.

“Be realistic”, said Lidia. “I could make a tiny difference. If I win”.

“You’d make a difference even if you didn’t win”, said Maria. “But winning isn’t impossible. Is it, Pavel?”

“Not at all”, said Pavel. “Let’s be frank about it. In an experienced democracy you wouldn’t stand a chance. Too many vested interests, too many party machines. But here we haven’t got all that yet. It’s coming, but it’s not here yet. I’d say you have a better chance than anyone else in the field”.

“There’s no-one here from Citizen’s Voice”, pointed out Lidia. “What do they say?”

Grigor nodded reassuringly. “They’re on side”, he said. “We just didn’t want to crowd you, you know”.

“Oh no?” said Lidia. And looking around her at this force of heavy persuasion, she grinned.

“Give me till Thursday”, she said.

“Thursday morning”, said Grigor. “Breakfast here. Unless you want me to call you again at 3 a.m.”

“It’s a funny thing”, said Grigor, half to himself, as they were walking across the lobby. “When I called everyone this morning at 3 a.m., Lidia was furious, and Maria wasn’t at home. You do lead an interesting life, Maria my dear. And you look remarkably fresh on it, I must say”.

Half-way through saying this he turned to her, just in time to catch, as he had intended to catch, the glance exchanged between the two women.

He winked again at the receptionist as he passed. And turning to Ivan, he said in a low voice: “She’ll do it, I think. I’m beginning to recognise her style”.

## Intermezzo 4.5

It was mid-afternoon, and a dark blue BMW was moving slowly down a narrow street on the outskirts of Vilnitz. One side of the street was dominated by a long blind wall in bricks of faded pink; this belonged to a former linen factory that had long since ceased to produce linen. For the time being it produced nothing at all, but rather absorbed debris of all kinds from many different sources.

The BMW pulled in to the entrance, which was just large enough to allow the driver to open the door and clamber laboriously out. He was a small man with black hair, who closed the door behind him with a soft thump. He had come to investigate the factory's potential for absorbing human debris, of the kind that needed to be treated with the utmost respect and discretion.

The very fact of this visit provoked in him a certain melancholy: it was the mark of a mission that had failed. And missions that failed usually left traces, traces that it took extraordinary thoroughness to efface. Fortunately the small man with black hair was nothing if not thorough.

He unlocked the three main locks on the front door with keys selected carefully from a thick bunch drawn from his coat pocket. The door swung open silently, which might have surprised an observer who noted the old and apparently decrepit state of the building. The man switched on a bright overhead light. A few feet beyond the main door stood a second door, without a lock. He pushed it open, but instead of stepping through the doorway, the man knelt down and looked carefully at the door posts about ten centimetres from the ground. His eyes narrowed; the thread he had fastened across the opening had gone. Someone or something had been here in the last three weeks. Probably a rat, but he could not be sure. He would have to change his plans.

He reached into his coat pocket again and took out a roll of thread. He fastened it again across the opening, then stepped over it and continued into the building.

He was thinking about Mrs. Liumov. An immensely impressive woman who would surely understand better than her husband where her interest lay. She had a son, which made it easier, and her silence would buy the boy's future.

It was remarkable, really, that so many unimpressive men should turn out to have such magnificent wives. It was a source of disappointment to him that the women in his own life had been, in comparison, so undependable.

Nothing else appeared to have been disturbed. He returned to his car and drove back towards the centre of Vilnitz. At a red traffic light he stopped and looked around him. On an advertising hoarding almost directly in front he could see the famous



stockings poster. He had not seen the television programme with the archbishop, but since then people had talked about nothing else.

The lights took a long time to change, and as he waited the small man with black hair studied the poster carefully. They really were magnificent legs. Their owner was said to be an impressive woman altogether. Perhaps he should pay her a visit sometime.

## Chapter 5

### Votes

Lidia's first election rally drew a vast crowd. It overflowed from the hall of the Vilnitz Music Academy into the square. Fortunately Pavel had been alerted by the numbers of people arriving early, and had rigged up a screen under the plane trees onto which were projected television pictures of the rally inside. It was a crisp, clear evening, and the cloudy breath of the thousands of overcoated figures in the square, shifting their feet to keep warm, created an atmosphere of ghostly expectancy. When Lidia appeared they roared their approval. They broke into applause at various moments during her short speech, and at the end gave her an ovation that seemed to make the branches lift above their heads.

"Who are these people?" she asked Pavel in astonishment as they sat afterwards in the suite of the Hotel Victoria that had become their campaign headquarters. Around them the campaign staff moved, carrying files, cups and plates, faxes, mobile phones. The room smelled of cigarettes, stewed coffee, ketchup. The people were mostly younger than Lidia herself – students, mainly, shepherded about their tasks by trusted older staff like Maria. Grigor was away at the studio, working on another programme, but from time to time he would call for news.

"I wish I knew", said Pavel. "We're working on it, but we won't have the answers for another few days. I tried to get an impression, moving around, but it wasn't easy. Not as many women as I expected; that's one thing I noticed. I'm sure they'll vote for you, but standing around outside on a cold evening isn't quite the same thing. That demands a more masculine kind of devotion. Apparently".

"You mean a more masculine kind of freedom", said Lidia. "I want some more daytime rallies, with balloons and things for children. Don't take their vote for granted".

Another kind of masculine devotion became evident the following morning. The official campaign photograph of Lidia showed her in a relatively sober grey suit: only a certain sparkle in her eyes signalled the élan she was proposing to bring to the tired political establishment. The poster on the walls all over the city showed the official photograph from the waist up. Pavel had negotiated with a cigarette company to distribute a miniature version of this poster in cigarette packets, and now hundreds of thousands of tiny Lidias were being unwrapped from cellophane and used to decorate desks, walls and windows across the country. Pavel had been delighted, until early in the morning he had become aware of a crucial fact about which the cigarette company had omitted to inform him. It had simultaneously negotiated with *Fist* the rights to a miniature version of Poster Three. One cigarette packet in ten contained Lidia below the waist instead of the official campaign poster, and there was already a stampede among collectors to match up the top half to the (much rarer and more highly prized) lower half. Several of the remaining copies of Poster Three around the city had already had

campaign posters added above them, and it was only a matter of time before campaign posters were routinely embellished with pirated versions of Poster Three. Pavel's marketing triumph was about to collapse in ridicule.

This, at least, was what he reported to a hastily convened crisis meeting in the campaign suite at seven-thirty in the morning. A television interview with Lidia was due to take place at nine. Pavel was apologetic, almost breast-beating. Grigor sat impassively, chain-smoking throughout. He was about to make a comment when Lidia arrived. Pavel repeated the confession. There was a silence at the end. No one wanted to anticipate Lidia's reaction.

She thought a moment, and then spoke. "Pavel", she said, "you lack one of the qualities essential for a top campaign strategist".

Pavel looked pained, anticipating the blow.

"And that is, you should never apologise. Anything can be turned into a success. Pavel, you've just pulled off a brilliant publicity stunt. Instead of celebrating as you ought to be doing, you're sitting here apologising. How dare you? You should be congratulated. That campaign photograph is quite the dreariest I've ever had taken. It would have been utterly forgotten if it weren't for the poster. Now everyone will know about it. People all over the country will see it and remember it. What you've done is every campaigner's dream. Well done!"

Pavel looked perplexed, though not displeased. He made a half protest.

"It's nice of you to say so", he began, "but it doesn't seem very...dignified".

Lidia narrowed her eyes. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

Grigor spoke next. "I think he means it may not be perceived as very presidential".

"Oh no?" said Lidia. "Well, let's see about that. It's done, anyway. I think we can make a virtue of it".

And so she did. Later that morning an incautious radio interviewer made the mistake of asking her:

"Miss Maliakova, is this a serious campaign?"

"Mr. Menkov", she replied unhesitatingly, "is that a serious question? And is this a serious programme?"

The interviewer did not know what to say. News of the interview soon got around, and Lidia was not asked such a supercilious question again.

But other interviewers returned to the theme, with a more subtle and dangerous persistence. “Miss Maliakova”, said one interviewer after a few gentle warm-up questions. She knew that when they used her name like that, deliberately, politely, in the middle of an interview, they thought themselves to be moving in for the kill. “You have no previous political experience. You are better known for your legs than for your brains. To be president requires you to do something quite different from selling underwear. Let’s suppose you have all the skill it takes. But how can you possibly persuade the people that you have? Where’s the evidence?”

Clever that, dressing up a series of insults as a question about marketing. Once, at a party in New York, just such a set of insults had left her interlocutor with the contents of a large glass of orange juice over the front of his trousers. But this was Vilnitz, not New York. And it was today. Now.

“That’s an important question”, said Lidia carefully, “and it deserves a thoughtful answer. First of all, being president is like no other job. Nothing prepares you completely for it. I don’t just mean that in some general way. You see, it’s especially not like any other job in politics. Being in politics usually means learning how to cut deals, how to look after your friends, how to lean with today’s wind. You can do all of that and make a good minister, even a good Prime Minister. I don’t mean you necessarily will, but you can. What you can’t do that way is make a good President. Not in a system like ours. Our President doesn’t run things in a day-to-day way. She stands back, takes a long-term view, and represents the country. To itself, to its people, to the rest of the world”.

“She does, does she?” said the interviewer, raising an eyebrow. “Well, let me...”

“I’m sorry”, continued Lidia. “If you ask me a question you must listen to the answer. You say I’m better known for my legs than for my brains. Of course I am. Until recently all I’d tried to persuade people to do was to buy stockings. They’re good stockings and I have good legs, so it’s natural, really. But I’m not in any danger of thinking good legs make a good president. Since this campaign started I’ve had all sorts of requests from fashion magazines. And I’ve turned them all down. Not because I suddenly think they’re undignified. No, I’m still impressionable enough to feel rather flattered by them. The point is, I’m not trying to sell fashion now. I’m trying to do something different. And I’m quite clear about the difference. But I’m not sure you are, otherwise you might ask me some more serious questions”.

It was an ever-present danger, like skiing through a minefield. At the end of each interview Lidia was always astonished to find herself alive, rather than vaporised in an instant by an innocent-looking undulation in her path.

The campaign was due to last for four weeks. One night a week after it began, the telephone rang at midnight in Lidia’s hotel room. She was alone, resting after an exhausting evening, which had included a rally in a small town an hour away from Vilnitz and then a radio interview. She lifted the receiver.

“Lidia?”

It was Emilia. The two friends never announced themselves by name. It was almost a point of honour.

There was laughter, a cascade, a release of tension on both sides.

“I got your message”, said Emilia. “Of course, I’d been following it all with...with amazement, really. But I didn’t know how best to get in touch with you. So...so here I am”.

They talked for nearly half an hour, and then Lidia said: “I have a crazy suggestion”.

“Coming from you, that must mean seriously crazy”.

“They’re talking about holding an economic debate. You know, televised. The suggestion came from Dolmek’s camp”. Dolmek was the candidate of the right.

“Anyway,” continued Lidia, “Dolmek’s got some young whizz-kid advising him, and the whizz-kid thinks the economy is my Achilles heel”.

“That must be Ruzov”.

“My, you *are* well informed. I thought you just got your news from CNN and the Washington Post”.

“Are you insane? CNN love you! They can’t get enough of you. It’s still mostly your legs, I’m afraid. But even they calm down enough from time to time to tell us who else is in this campaign”.

“Is that right? You know, I have CNN here in this hotel. But I never get time to see it”.

“You should try”.

“Yes. Well, anyway, Dolmek’s camp want an economic debate. Guess they think they can rattle me. So here’s my idea. You come here for a few days. You can be my secret weapon. Coach me a bit. Bring me up to speed on this stuff. It’s been a long time since I studied it properly”.

There was silence for a moment. Then Lidia spoke again, very quietly: “Please”.

“Lidia, it’s a crazy idea. You’re right about that. It’s impossible. But I guess I’ve done impossible things before. I have some back leave owing me. Let me try and arrange things and call you back. When exactly is the debate?”

“I don’t know. Soon. But we have some say in it”.

“I’ll be there”.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a cold breeze blowing as the archbishop turned into Cathedral Square. It had already been nearly dark when he left Rudi’s apartment, and by now there was only the faintest trace of daylight in the far corner of the sky.

The archbishop was in a disgruntled mood, for which Rudi’s conversation was only partly responsible. The archbishop was honest enough to admit to himself that he was distinctly irritated that he should have had enough free time this week to visit Rudi at all. The last time there had been a presidential election campaign (which was also the first time, now he thought about it), the archbishop had been in continual demand from the press, radio and television, who had sought spiritual guidance on the issues on behalf of a bewildered population. This time they were already ten days into the campaign. Apart from a respectful full-page interview in the *Vilnitz Veterinary Gazette* which had concentrated mainly on the future of the pig-farms under the Church’s control, the only press interest in the archbishop had come from the foreign media, whose principal concern had been to remind their readers and viewers about that ridiculous poster. Having confidently expected to be able to cancel his visits to Rudi for the duration of the campaign, the archbishop found himself suddenly more cancelled against than cancelling. Meetings he had arranged with various government figures were postponed “till a more suitable time”. His weekly devotional slot on the public radio station had been replaced by Election Update and the first half of a jazz programme. Temporarily, of course: that was what they all said. Gabriel must be losing his touch.

In the circumstances, Rudi’s odious cheerfulness that afternoon had only rubbed salt in the wound. The archbishop was the last person in the world to deny a sick man some innocent fun, though Rudi was the kind of person who provoked in him an understandable wish to stretch a point. But with Rudi nothing was ever innocent, and his high spirits had made the archbishop wonder whether he was even particularly sick, except in his sense of humour.

“She’s got them on the run!” Rudi had said with emphatic enthusiasm. “Of course, she’ll be a disaster as president. But what fun!”

“The really interesting thing”, he had added in a conspiratorial whisper, “will be to see if she can control Czernov’s spies”.

Rudi had an irritating habit of watching you after a remark like that to see if you looked surprised. Or curious. If you didn't, and made the mistake of pretending to have heard it all before, Rudi would quiz you about what you knew. The safest thing, the archbishop had discovered by watching others, was to raise an eyebrow, implying that you were sure he had some magnificent secrets to impart but that you were worldly enough to be surprised by nothing. Unfortunately the archbishop lacked whatever gene it was that enabled people to raise just one eyebrow at a time, so his attempts to do so merely made him look idiotically astonished, and elicited Rudi's most patronising behaviour.

"You see, by the end those spies were completely out of control", said Rudi. "I don't think Czernov himself knew a quarter of what they were up to. You probably never realised this, but a lot of very innocent looking accidents were all down to them. You know, people Czernov found inconvenient. Or people the spies thought he ought to find inconvenient. You were lucky that never included you. That probably doesn't say anything very flattering about you, but you were lucky all the same".

*"Archbishop slaughters helpless invalid with carving knife"* was only one of the imaginary headlines in the *Voice of Vilnitz* that had wound its way into the archbishop's overwrought mind as he listened politely to Rudi's ramblings. It was a relief to find himself back in his apartments and to hear Gabriel's deep cadences outlining his programme for tomorrow.

"What's your reading of the election now?" asked the archbishop when Gabriel had finished. It was not something they had yet discussed. A certain embarrassment had restrained them, each not wishing to indulge visibly his half-buried conviction that the whole mess was somehow obscurely the other's fault. But just now the archbishop felt the need for the balm of Gabriel's cool good sense after the contortions required to follow Rudi in his paranoia.

"Well, it's fascinating, certainly", said Gabriel. He was drawing faces on a sheet of paper, as he often did while they were talking. Gabriel was a portraitist manqué, with a gift for savage caricature. "She hasn't got a chance, of course. This is a nine-day wonder. But it's interesting while it lasts".

"You say a nine-day wonder", put in the archbishop pedantically. "But it's at least day ten of the campaign".

Gabriel waved a hand to dismiss this footling objection. "The point is, she hasn't been put under any pressure at all yet. Dolmek's camp have hardly even got going. They haven't had a televised debate. Apparently they're going to have one on the economy. She'll just look ridiculous. The whole thing will fade away".

The archbishop frowned. "It doesn't seem to matter what she *says* on television. People just remember how she looks. And then they think that's a reason to vote for her.

And from one point of view, they're right. Who cares what the president thinks about economic policy? That's not the president's job; it's the government's job. I wouldn't put any faith in her fading away".

Again Gabriel looked loftily unpersuaded. "But Dolmek and Bronski have the organisation. She doesn't". Bronski was the candidate of the reconstructed communists, now called the National Revival Party. "That's going to be what delivers the votes in the end".

"Why?" asked the archbishop. "Who needs an organisation if you've got television?"

"Oh!" said Gabriel. "It's one thing for viewers to like the look of someone they've seen on t.v. It's quite another for them to go out and vote for that person. You've got to have an organisation to get voters to come out of their houses and show themselves. People still need to be told how to vote".

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Before Emilia could call again she found a message from Lidia on her answering machine. "It's me. There's been a change of plan. Dolmek's called off the economic debate. Seems that when he issued the challenge he didn't know I had a degree in the subject, let alone one from the LSE. His own was from Moscow, at least twenty years ago. So"...there was a pause..."So, well, I can't in all conscience ask you to drop everything and come here. But I'd love to see you sometime".

Lidia was not in her hotel when Emilia called back. So when she returned late that evening, from another rally, among the pile of messages handed to her by the front desk was an unnamed telephone message simply reading: "I'll come anyway. For the victory party".

\* \* \* \* \*

In the event Lidia Maliakova polled 58% of all the votes cast in the presidential election, against 28% for Dolmek and a mere 14% for Bronski. Her margin of victory astonished everyone, even Grigor. The *New York Times* gave front-page coverage to her triumph, calling her the "charismatic and photogenic outsider", and even wrote a puzzled leader admitting itself entirely uncertain what kind of popular verdict this might represent upon the reforms of the last three years. With even more surprising candour it admitted that the reason the Western press knew so little about Lidia Maliakova's politics was that



so few people had bothered to ask her, preferring instead to concentrate on taking her photograph.

In fact, not quite everyone was surprised. Rudi had taken his sleeping tablet as usual at 9.30 p.m. without even waiting for the results of the first exit polls, which were embargoed until the voting stations closed at 10. The following morning at 6, Marta laid his tea on the table beside his bed, lifted him up and propped him on his pillow and, without making any comment, switched on the radio. Rudi listened carefully, with a smile playing about his lips. Ten minutes later, as Marta moved quietly about the room, opening and closing drawers and tidying things away, Rudi switched off the radio and said to her: "Now is when the fun really begins!"

It was a sentiment silently echoed by a small man with black hair who had parked his BMW on the bridge over the river. He was listening to the election result on the car radio as he watched two men on the bank below, fishing in the cold dawn.

The victory party had begun around midnight in the hall of the Vilnitz Music Academy, as the first returns made it clear that Lidia's lead was greater than anyone had dared to predict. Lidia herself was with a smaller group at the Vilnitz City Hall, where the official results from the regions were being announced as they came in. Shortly after 2 o'clock the returning officer took the podium to announce the result from the Turnow district. It was 78% in favour of Lidia. It took everyone in the hall, half-drunk on adrenalin and air even when they were not wholly drunk on more conventional intoxicants, a moment to calculate what this meant. In one single result, Lidia had not only established an unassailable lead over Dolmek, who could not now overtake her even if he won the votes of all the registered electors in regions that had yet to announce their results. She had also obtained more than 50% of the maximum number of votes cast. As people began to realise, there was a slow rumbling of applause, a kind of wakening cheer that swelled until it turned into a vast roar of delight. The returning officer had to appeal several times for silence, before announcing: "I can therefore officially confirm that Ms Lidia Maliakova has obtained more than 50% of the votes in the election. Consequently I can declare that she has been elected President of the Republic".

Inside the Vilnitz Music Academy there was a cheer that made the entire building seem to hover fractionally above its foundations. It was rivalled only by the cheer that resounded half an hour later when Lidia arrived with the group from the City Hall. There was whistling and stamping and clapping and the bursting of balloons, and people surging forward at the door to take her hand, a wave that almost swept her off her feet. Pavel and a couple of helpers tried to contain the pressure at her sides, stretching their arms out protectively around her. Just in front of them, Grigor applied his great bulk to clearing a way through the crowd like a snowplough turning aside the remains of an avalanche. Although he did not realise it at the time, his bulk was lightened fractionally by the removal of his wallet – the prize of a pickpocket who did such good business working the election night crowds that he would subsequently be able to take early retirement and set up a vodka kiosk near the station. But if this in any way slowed

Grigor's passage through the crowd, it went unnoticed by those whom he pressed aside with the apparent effortlessness of Moses parting the Red Sea.

Lidia's speech was brief and interrupted with cheers so many times that few of those listening could remember later what she had said, least of all Lidia herself. Then a jazz band struck up, and the party was on. Emilia remembered afterwards, with a strange surge in which exhilaration was a little mixed with fear, the way Lidia caught her eye across the hall, some confused time later during the night, and danced her way across to lace her arms around Emilia's neck. The two danced together for a few minutes, Emilia feeling her old awkwardness on the dance floor even more so now that the occasion was so momentous. Then she excused herself and went to sit down.

"I'm sorry", she said, as Lidia came up to her, tender, solicitous. "It's all just too much, really. I didn't get off the plane till about five o'clock. And what with finding a place to vote, and everything else, I haven't eaten. I haven't slept. Sorry".

A moment later she added, almost apologetically: "I feel a bit out of place, with these impressive friends of yours".

Lidia said quietly: "I remember feeling that, the time I came to see you in Boston. It's strange how time evens everything up, isn't it?"

Sure enough, within a few minutes Emilia's sense of panic had been submerged again in the tide of shared astonishment and celebration that this was happening at all. She sat for some time just watching the electric joy of this crowd.

Lidia and Emilia returned together to the hotel at around five-thirty in the morning. Flash bulbs leapt as they passed through the great revolving door. There were still supporters around them, in the lobby, in the elevator, people everywhere trying excitedly to catch Lidia's ear. Emilia felt Lidia's hand on her shoulder, then a whisper: "Come with me".

When the elevator reached Lidia's floor Emilia stepped out obediently with her. Suddenly, and miraculously, they were alone. Somewhere, distantly, Emilia knew that exhaustion and collapse lay just around the corner of her consciousness, but now she felt just the tingle of one whose actions seemed to follow their own music, unsensed by anyone else. Except, perhaps, by Lidia.

When Lidia kissed her, inside the great suite, the first touch of her lips caused a swell of emotion, a recollection of so many embraces of the past, and of the ache of even more embraces denied, that Emilia felt a surge of tears and had almost to shut down her senses to keep herself from collapse. But Lidia was so tender, so unexpectedly alert to the small breezes of love after the great hurricanes she had ridden that night, that Emilia gave herself up easily. She allowed Lidia to undress her, to lay her on the bed, and to apply the softness of lips and tongue without reserve until her quickening breath, the sense of

acceleration as of approaching a vast waterfall, made her reach out her fingers, twine them in her friend's hair and gently reinforce the rising pressure against her loins.

Afterwards Lidia said, "I hope you don't mind". It was the first sign of nervousness Emilia had seen in her in a long while.

"How could I refuse the President of the Republic?" she answered with a smile.

"I was afraid you'd say that", said Lidia. They hugged one another, and laughed. They both knew it was a reply they would find less amusing in the future.

A sense of hovering fractionally above her own physical frame stayed with Emilia while she slept and throughout the rest of that day. Only late the next evening did she begin to ask herself whether Lidia had done any more than plant a scented flag on the summit of her triumph.

## Intermezzo 5.5

It was four o'clock in the morning, just over 24 hours after the announcement of Lidia's election. It had been a clear and very cold night. An inflatable dinghy was bobbing precariously in the river a hundred kilometers downstream of Vilnitz. The small man with black hair was lowering a body wrapped tightly in tarpaulin into the water. Careful observation of the habits of fishermen had convinced him that, even heavily weighted, a body ran too great a risk of discovery if dumped any closer to the city.

Liumov had made an awful fuss. That was the trouble with kidnap victims: they slept badly, and were almost guaranteed to wake up when you came to dispose of them. Liumov seemed to believe that the mere fact of being kidnapped (rather than killed immediately) somehow entitled him to eventual release, as though one would not have put oneself to the trouble of looking after him otherwise. He was incapable of grasping the fact that his survival or otherwise was simply a matter of luck. He had been kidnapped because he was probably of more value to Czernov alive than dead. Now Czernov was dead, and Dolmek, who might have thought like Czernov, had lost the election. This woman who had won, this Lidia, had almost certainly never heard of Liumov. And in any case she was virtually a foreigner, someone whose priorities were quite different. What those priorities were, the small man with black hair would have to make some effort to find out. But he could hardly imagine she would have much use for a man like Liumov. So it made sense to dispose of him, even if Liumov himself could hardly be expected to see the logic of that.

The body slid into the water with a quiet but satisfying "schlop". Using a long pole, the man felt carefully around the spot to ensure there were no unnecessary traces, of the kind that might snag on an oar or a fishing line. Then he paddled back to the riverbank, climbed out and pressed on the valve to deflate the dinghy. Lifting it with a grunt onto his back, he climbed back to the road, where his car sat with the trunk open like a vast pterodactyl chick waiting to be fed. Dropping the collapsed dinghy inside, he closed the trunk, got into the car and started up the engine.

## Chapter 6

### Jobs

The swearing-in ceremony was held two days after the election, at five o'clock in the afternoon. It took place in the reception hall of the Presidential Palace, which was itself one of the wings of Vilnitz castle. The invitation cards all said four p.m. even though everyone knew that meant five. It was a convention that dated from an occasion in the late 1970s when the entire Cabinet had been transported to a swearing-in ceremony in the government fleet of Autovils, four of which had broken down on the way. Nowadays the Cabinet travelled everywhere by Mercedes, so the convention was unnecessary, a baroque reminder of the time before the whirlwinds that had swept both necessary and unnecessary things indiscriminately away.

At four o'clock proper the Cabinet had been presented to the new President, in the sombre panelled conference room just off the main reception hall. They numbered eighteen, all serious-looking men aged between thirty-five and sixty. Lidia had met four of them during the campaign, and knew several more by sight. Stahl, the Prime Minister, was an energetic and mercurial man who had once been described by *Dog Eat Dog* as "a liberal communist nationalist reactionary, but a convinced one". He presided over a fragile coalition the unity of which required him to balance any Cabinet appointment by appointing also the minister's most vociferous parliamentary opponent. There was Budjevsky, the Minister of Finance, a man obsessed with making economies, and Gurilov, the Minister of the Economy, a man whose one thought was to make Minister of Finance. The two stood at opposite ends of the semicircle drawn up to shake Lidia's hand, from where they could glare at each other uninterrupted by the constraints of politeness. There was the Minister of Education, whose job was to keep young people off the unemployment register, and the Minister of Employment, who measured his success in terms of the speed and alacrity with which young people could be persuaded to leave school. There was the Minister of Privatization and the Minister of Nationalization. There was a Minister for Industry, who campaigned to reduce the privileges granted to agriculture, and a Minister for Agriculture, who sought to raise taxes on industry instead. There was a Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, and a Minister of Foreign Affairs, known to *Dog Eat Dog* as the Minister of Utterly Uneconomic Relations. Their responsibilities were, respectively, countries with cash and countries with tanks, though with much confusion of roles since some countries fell into both categories and many fell into neither. There was a Minister of Culture. There was no Minister of Revolvers, reflected Lidia, though there ought to have been. Perhaps they all shared the portfolio, she thought suddenly in some alarm, wondering whether shoulder-holsters were the explanation for the very stiff way they all stood, arms hanging a fraction away from their sides until they broke into animation when the moment came to grasp Lidia's hand. The Minister of Defence had sent his apologies pleading a heavy attack of flu.

The sense that most Cabinet ministers were somehow balanced or neutralised by a rival made almost sinister the presence of those who were not. There was the Minister for

National Statistics. “He’s famous in Washington”, Emilia had said of him. “It’s said that the motto hanging in his office reads: *We are powerless to affect the future: the most we can do is to exercise our benevolent influence on the past.*” There was the Minister of the Interior, whose expertise in the post derived in part from having spent time in prison under the communist regime (though for embezzlement rather than dissidence, as it happened). The Minister of Health, a former surgeon, spent much of the ceremony loudly blowing his nose. Finally, the Minister without Portfolio was a smiling man who walked everywhere carrying two briefcases, as if afraid of losing his balance were he to carry only one. Nobody, said Emilia, had the slightest idea what he actually did.

The Prime Minister took Lidia down the line of men, briskly, as if wishing to avoid the need to make small talk. Afterwards the line broke up and tea was served at a long table covered with starched white linen. Lidia began to circulate, trying to make these little groups of tense men feel at ease. It was a difficult task, but one at which she had much skill. There was a perceptible lightening of mood after a few minutes, and even some laughter. Then she felt a touch at her elbow. It was Rimov, the President’s private secretary, who whispered: “The swearing-in is in five minutes. You may wish to prepare”.

“Yes”, said Lidia. “But I’d just like to speak to the Cabinet for thirty seconds”.

Rimov clinked his cup and held up a hand to silence the conversation. The hush was instant – almost eerily so, making Lidia realise how continuously aware was everyone in the room of what was happening around the President.

“I’d like to thank you for your welcome, and to say how much I look forward to working with you. Over the next days and weeks I shall be taking advantage of my constitutional rights to request meetings with each of you. I hope they will not be a burden to you. For me they will certainly be a pleasure”.

There was a polite round of applause. Then, after granting Lidia a moment’s escape to the bathroom, Rimov and Stahl accompanied her to the door of the great gilded reception hall. At a signal from Rimov a uniformed man opened the door and the three of them walked through, Lidia in the centre. The applause swelled up at them like a blast of desert heat.

For an instant Lidia felt stunned. Not because this was strange, but on the contrary because of an extraordinary and unexpected familiarity.

This was the catwalk in Milan.

Of course the architecture here was distinctly grander. That wasn’t hard, considering the sheer ugliness of the modern convention centre at Fiera Campionaria where the designer collections were shown. But the sense of hundreds of eyes focussed on her every movement was identical.

Lidia dropped her shoulders and settled into her stride.

The ceremony was brief. While she was reading the oath Lidia lifted her eyes towards the left of the front row, where her mother and Emilia were sitting. She could almost hear Tatiana say: “Well done, my dear. But when are you going to do something serious?”

Afterwards there was a reception. As it began Lidia noticed the archbishop of Vilnitz slipping out of the door. He had evidently felt constrained not to miss the swearing-in – it would have been too easy to put a hostile construction on his absence otherwise. But it was understandable that he should wish to make his attendance brief.

Tatiana had left at the beginning, too. Lidia understood. She was not someone who could expect to feel comfortable being introduced as someone else’s mother. Even a President’s. Or perhaps especially a President’s.

Presidential Secretary Rimov was at Lidia’s elbow through most of the reception, murmuring names to her, sometimes adding a few words of explanation. There was a highly orchestrated character to her encounters; clearly she was not meeting people by chance. Milan again: she was used to it.

There was much shaking of hands, smiling, making one-line remarks. At one moment Grigor came up to her, with three grey-suited men in tow.

“Mnmnmnmnmnmnm,...., director of Vilnitz Ventures,...., remarkable export performance,....,mnmnmnmnmnm,....,important contracts,....,mnmnmnmnmnm,...., Chamber of Commerce,...., party supporters,....,mnmnmnmnmnm,...., hope to see you,....mnmnmnmnmnm”.

“Delighted to meet you”, said Lidia, for the forty-third time that evening.

As they were talking Grigor moved closer to her. Then he touched her arm.

“Can I see you afterwards?” he asked in a low voice.

“Of course”, she said, almost automatically. It was strange to think that even Grigor might be afraid of Presidential Secretary Rimov.

At seven-thirty precisely Rimov said to her: “The car is waiting”.

“Oh?” said Lidia. “What for?”

“The dinner”, said Rimov patiently.

“Yes, of course”, said Lidia. “It’ll have to wait. I have promised to speak to Mr. Moratis”.

Rimov looked at her. Sullenly, she thought.

“I shall be ten minutes”, she added. “Please ask Mr. Moratis to meet me next door”.

When Grigor came through the door she motioned to him to sit down. They were in a very large meeting-room, and it felt strange. There was a cold smell of furniture polish. Lidia looked at her watch and made a careful note of the time.

“I want to get rid of Rimov”, she said quietly.

Grigor nodded. “Of course”, he answered. He also spoke quietly, as though neither of them could know who might be listening. “And who do you propose to put in his place?”

“I thought you might help me there”, said Lidia. “I want someone independent”.

Grigor snorted. “Oh yes?” he said. Then he stopped, as if making an effort to control himself. When he spoke again it was more measured.

“Listen, Lidia”, he began. “You’re right about Rimov. It was the first thing I wanted to say to you. He’s the *ancien regime*, and you deserve better. If you want me to find you a replacement, I’ll try. But don’t hope for too much. Everyone has their own agenda”.

“Don’t be stupid. I know that. But I’m not giving you *carte blanche* either. I want some control over the process. For a start, I want an open process. Not just insiders”.

“Yes? How exactly?”

“We can advertise”.

Grigor looked impatient. “Do you have any idea how many people would answer an advertisement for Presidential Secretary?”

Lidia had a sense she was being tested. “I have no idea”, she said, after a pause.

“At a conservative guess, fifteen thousand”, said Grigor. “Want to look through their resumes yourself?”

Lidia took a deep breath. “Okay, just show me a hundred”, she said. “Make sure you include a few eccentrics. You know, women, that sort of thing”.

Grigor smiled. “It’s a deal”, he said.



“Now what was the second thing you wanted to say to me?” asked Lidia.

Grigor scratched his chin before replying. “Those men I introduced to you just now”, he said. “I’d like you to be nice to them”.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning be nice to them. Invite them to dinner. Make them feel important”.

“Why?”

“They gave a lot of money to your campaign”.

Lidia was silent for a moment. “You think I should sleep with everyone who sends me roses?”

“I didn’t say sleep with them. Not even metaphorically. I said be nice to them. You certainly should be nice to people who send you roses. It’s only good manners”.

“Now you’re the one who’s being naïve”, said Lidia impatiently. “They didn’t give me money just for a dinner invitation”.

“You’d be surprised how vain people are”, said Grigor. “They all have a lot of friends who’d be very impressed they had dinner at the Presidential Palace. They like to feel they have influence even if it doesn’t buy them anything concrete”.

Lidia frowned. Then Grigor added: “And besides, who knows if it was their money to give? It probably didn’t cost them all that much”.

“But you took it anyway?” she asked.

“Of course”, said Grigor. “If anything’s proved against them we’ll have to give it back. But it’s hardly our job to check up on everyone. Otherwise we’d never get anyone elected”.

“That’s not the point”, said Lidia. “You may not be able to prove anything. But you must still have a pretty good idea whether this money’s clean or not”.

Grigor hesitated a moment, as though he had been about to say something different. Then he replied: “As far as I can tell, it’s clean. I’m not sure, but at least I don’t know of anything against these particular guys. And that’s not as weak as it sounds. I know things about most of the rich people in this country. Just not them”.

“You know”, he said reflectively, “It’s going to get harder and harder to know what’s clean and what isn’t in this country. The rules have changed, but no one knows

what they are any more. If you demand impossible standards you'll never get anywhere. *You* wouldn't have got here, for a start". He glanced briefly at the magnificence around him.

"Grigor, this isn't as unfamiliar to me as you may think. The modelling business makes politics seem very clean".

Grigor smiled, encouraging her to continue. It was both his hobby and his profession to extract people's reminiscences.

"The first time I worked in Milan I was put up in a hotel everyone called the Fuck Palace. The second time I worked in Milan a fifty-year old bald guy met me at the airport in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. He was holding a bunch of roses in one hand and a bag of cocaine in the other, and half way into town he took his cock out. I told him to put it back or I'd bite it off".

"Brave words".

"I thought I'd never work again".

"No, I meant you might have choked".

"It wasn't big enough to pose a risk".

Grigor inclined his head a fraction. There was silence for a moment. Then Lidia reached into her handbag and took out a small notebook and a pencil. She scribbled on a clean page of the notebook, tore it off and passed it to Grigor. On it he read the words: "How much did they give? Approximately".

He gestured for her to pass him the pencil. He wrote a sum and passed the paper back to her.

Her eyes widened for a moment, and then she controlled herself. She wrote again and passed him back the paper. It read: "I can repay it if I have to. But next time you consult me first. Or you repay it yourself".

Aloud she said: "I want a report on the state of the party finances. On my desk by a week on Monday, please".

Grigor grinned at her. "I'm not a party official. I'm just a friend of yours. You'll have to address your request to one of them directly. But I'll warn them to expect it".

Lidia stood up. "Good", she said. "Thank you, Grigor. Of course I'll be nice to your friends. Your other friends. As long as they realise that's all it'll be".

Grigor grinned even more broadly. “I don’t care whether they realise it or not. I’ve done my bit. Now it’s between them and you”.

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The next morning Rimov met Lidia in her office at eight. His own office was next door, and he had evidently been there for some time when she arrived. He opened out for her the large desk diary bound in its cheap imitation grey leather. Lidia suppressed a remark of surprise. She had been used to corporate New York for too long, and was still taking time to adjust to a world in which imitation leather could be thought presidential, while millions could be spent from the government budget on restoring the gilt mirrors in the reception rooms of the palace.

“Okay, so that’s today”, she said, when he had finished his explanation. “You’ve left me approximately three minutes for relaxing, going to the bathroom, telephoning my mother and developing my philosophy of life. What about tomorrow?”

Rimov’s technique for handling sarcasm was to ignore it. So effectively had he developed it that most observers doubted whether he noticed sarcasm any more.

Tomorrow was full as well. As was the rest of the week.

“Who are these people?” she asked.

Rimov’s sigh was no less expressive for being inaudible. “As I said”, he began, “we start today with the Chamber of Commerce. Then the League of Concerned Mothers. Then the Russian ambassador...”

“I know. You said all that”, said Lidia. “What I mean is something different. You arranged all of this without consulting me. Do I get any choice in the matter?”

Rimov’s ability to communicate his meaning without apparent movement of his facial muscles would have aroused the envy of a professional ventriloquist. But Lidia’s silent insistence eventually obliged him to reply aloud.

“Your Excellency”, he said, “There are a great many people whom it is the normal duty and custom of the President to meet. As you know, the country has been without a President for some two months. In addition to those whom protocol requires you to meet - ambassadors, for example – there are many who would have wished to meet our late President during that time. It would be unreasonable to deny them the right to do so now that the country has a President once more”.

“I understand what you’re saying”, said Lidia. “I do not intend to shirk my responsibilities. I merely think that before you fill up my days completely you should consult with me as to our priorities”.

“Very well”, said Rimov. “What would you like me to do?”

“For one thing”, said Lidia, “I’d like you to arrange meetings with the Cabinet. I mean individually. We can begin with Budjevsky”.

“Very well”, said Rimov. “I suppose I could postpone the lunch with the Vilnitz Red Cross this Thursday. But if I could make a suggestion, it might be wise to leave Budjevsky for a little while. He has to present the annual budget to Parliament the week after next. I think the Finance Ministry is virtually on a war footing”.

“Mister Rimov”, said Lidia deliberately. “I think Budjevsky might find it in his interest to discuss the budget with the President *before* he attempts to present it to Parliament. And lunch is out of the question. I want a proper working meeting. Two hours minimum. With papers delivered to me twenty-four hours beforehand”.

“Very well”, said Rimov again.

“And another thing. Please don’t keep saying ‘very well’ as if I were asking you to do something utterly distasteful. Just do it”.

“Very well”, said Rimov, and then checked himself. Lidia, who unlike the archbishop was indeed able to raise a single eyebrow, did so now to considerable effect.

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When Finance Minister Budjevsky and his team of advisers made their exit from the President’s office shortly after midday the following Friday, an observer who remembered their jaunty demeanour at nine-thirty would have noted a remarkable transformation. For one thing, they said very little – in marked contrast to the stream of banter they were exchanging when they arrived. Two of the advisers walked in silence to the men’s room in the corridor where they stood side by side against the urinal. One said: “Did you see his face when she...?” and the other nodded. The Minister himself said nothing until he was seated in the back of the Mercedes, when he turned to his young aide and asked: “Could anyone have leaked your memo?”

“No, I don’t think so”, said the young man. “But there was nothing in it that couldn’t have been discovered from a careful reading of the accounts. In fact, that was the whole point. I was saying it would probably be picked up sooner or later, and eventually by the IMF”.

Budjevsky nodded gravely. “Of course, her grasp of things is pretty superficial”, he said.

The aide had the feeling he was supposed to agree. He compromised with an ambiguous tilt of his head.

“Still”, added Budjevsky, “I got the impression she wasn’t hostile to the whole thing. It’ll probably help to have her on our side when it comes to the Parliament”.

“Mmm”, said the aide.

“After all”, said Budjevsky, “their grasp of things is pretty superficial too”.

The young man felt a little more comfortable nodding his agreement at this point. But he could not help reflecting on Budjevsky’s own inability to ignore the superficial. It was common gossip among the secretaries in the Ministry that Mrs. Budjevsky had recently moved out of the marital bedchamber. She had done so in the same week that Budjevsky’s mistress had left him – “for another horse”, as one particularly disgruntled secretary had put it, in resentment at being put under pressure to stand in for both the women concerned. At any rate, Budjevsky seemed to have had particular difficulty concentrating during his cross-examination by the President, and his aide suspected this was due not just to feeling himself on intellectually weak ground.

When she returned to the apartments in the Palace late that evening, Lidia reported the event to Emilia. Emilia was packing for her departure to Washington the following morning.

“Your tuition couldn’t have been better”, said Lidia with a chuckle. “I don’t know what they thought they were doing. They started off with one of the young men giving me a presentation. You know, overhead slides full of meaningless phrases like ‘a secure future’ and ‘stability assured’. I listened for ten minutes or so and then asked when we were going to get some proper analysis. So they went to the other extreme. Charts and tables flung at me thick and fast. Thank God we talked them all through last night. I wouldn’t have known what to say otherwise. It’s years since I’ve done this stuff. My brain was horribly sore by the end. But not as sore as theirs”.

“I think that’s Budjevsky’s style”, said Emilia. “It’s either platitudes or pie-charts. The people on the country desk in Washington find him infuriating. What did he say about those problems we found in the money supply figures?”

“Oh, he knew the game was up as soon as I raised it”, said Lidia. “That didn’t stop him blustering, of course. But he’s promised to give me a proper report on it before they go to Parliament. I’ve made it clear it’s the price of my support. Though what my support counts for in Parliament has yet to be determined. I may be the kiss of death”.

“Well, if you are”, said Emilia, “I’d like to nominate a few people for you to kiss”.

“Thank you”, said Lidia. “I’ll bear it in mind. I guess I owe you a few big favours now. In fact, I can’t think what I’m going to do without you”.

Emilia looked away. Lidia always managed perfectly well without her.

Later, when Emilia had finished, Lidia dismissed the housekeeper, and they drank slivovitz by the fire in the private study. Emilia was very subdued, and when Lidia moved over to put an arm around her she found her friend was shaking. They sat without saying anything for several minutes.

“I’m sorry”, said Emilia eventually. “I’m no good at saying good-bye. It never seems to bother you, but I’m hopeless at it”.

“I think it’s because I’m never really conscious of saying good-bye to anyone”, said Lidia after a moment. “Whether it’s tomorrow or next year, I know I’ll see you again. I’m not afraid for you”.

“But I’m very afraid for you”.

Lidia smiled and said nothing.

Lidia’s theory about herself was very neat, thought Emilia later, but utterly unconvincing. Before they parted, Lidia’s lovemaking was always very fierce. She would straddle her friend, grip her hair, probe deeply and dangerously as if in a barely suppressed rage. Emilia had evolved different ways of coping with a return to solitude.

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That night saw the first snowfall of the winter. When Lidia looked out of her window the world had gone into slow motion. The snow drifted downwards at a quarter of the speed of the rain she remembered from yesterday; cars crawled along the avenue in front of the Castle as though on dope; pedestrians, tiny at this distance, picked their way gradually and methodically over the dirty white kerbs and pavements.

Unusually, Rimov had not yet arrived by the time she reached her office. She normally found the sheer reliability of his presence irritating, but this morning it was his absence that annoyed her. She was feeling unusually befuddled and needed some warning about the programme for the day.

About five minutes after Lidia had sat down at her desk, she heard his door open and the stamping of feet next door as he knocked the snow off his shoes. She got up and walked to the connecting door between their offices. She opened the door, and was half way through when she stopped in surprise. And alarm.

The man hanging up his coat on the tall stand beside the door of Rimov's office was not Rimov. He was a small man with black hair whom she had never seen before.

Lidia gave a small gasp.

"Who are you?"

The small man with black hair turned round. "Oh, I am sorry", he said. Then he held out his hand.

"Konstantin Korov, Your Excellency".

Lidia extended her hand warily. The man took it and lifted it briefly to his lips.

Lidia took back her hand. "How did you get here? How did Security let you in?"

Korov looked at her in surprise. She was obviously confused.

"I *am* Security", he said.

Lidia looked at him blankly for a moment, and then said: "Oh yes, of course. Forgive me. It's just that you startled me. I thought you weren't coming till eight-thirty".

"It *is* eight-thirty, Your Excellency".

"Ah, I'm sorry. Normally Rimov is here by this time".

"Unfortunately, Rimov drives an Autovil, Your Excellency".

"I take it that you don't, then".

"No, Your Excellency. I have a BMW".

Lidia was still standing awkwardly in the doorway. "Well, you'd better come in then", she said.

They both went through into the large Presidential office. There was a corner with a sofa and three leather armchairs disposed around a glass table. Lidia motioned to Korov to sit down.

"I'd like to offer you tea", she said. "Only Rimov normally arranges that. It sounds pathetic, but I haven't yet discovered how to do it myself".

Her brain was working furiously, trying to remember what Rimov had said about her visitor. "He's the head of Presidential security". She remembered that much. But what exactly did that amount to? It wasn't just the bodyguards, she was fairly sure of that.

She was reluctant to show her ignorance, but there must be a way to get him to tell her what Rimov should have said.

She settled down into one of the armchairs facing Korov. “Perhaps you’d better start”, she said, “by telling me in your own words exactly what it is you do. I mean, what your responsibilities cover. Or used to cover, under our late President”.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Korov left, Lidia cursed Rimov for not briefing her the day before. She had been surprised to feel herself so flustered by the incident. She had taken in very little of what Korov said to her, and would be forced to face the embarrassment of asking Rimov for an explanation. Though of course when Korov had mentioned what he called Special Operations he had said it wasn’t something Rimov knew about anyway. Lidia felt thoroughly disgruntled; for the first time in her new job she had been left looking like a fool.

Korov, on the other hand, thought everything looked highly promising. The President had seemed very receptive to his plans for a reorganisation of the security system. She had made one or two token gestures towards populism – demanding freedom to do walkabouts among the people, for example – but all new Presidents did that, and it took only a crazed gunman for them to retreat in gratitude into their security cocoon. Crazed gunmen were easy to arrange. As for Special Operations, he thought she had shown a most fetching coyness about it all. “Just spare me the sordid details”, she had seemed to be saying. Pretending not to understand: politicians were all the same.

There had been a time, once, a long time ago, when Korov himself had not really understood. From time to time the Korov of today would recall that earlier creature with indulgent recognition. He had not been so unlike the people by whom Korov was surrounded today. But that was before, that was in the bad time. The time when there had been so much pain, when every breath had been laced with fear. His own breath, the breath of vodka from his father’s unshaven face, the breath of decay given off by the leather belt the man would remove with such deliberate arrogance; all of these were now scattered by the sunlight. Since his liberation Korov moved without sound through an exhilaratingly unscented world.

Korov had once been a vegetarian. Eating the flesh of animal carcasses was a repugnant idea, really, and like many repugnant ideas it was remarkably easy to get used to once you had faced down your initial gagging reflex. People did it all the time, learned to love what had once horrified them. Yet they never drew the obvious conclusion, which was that nothing need ever be horrifying again.



Of course, this had always been something of a secret. Even with President Prinakov, the one who had promoted Korov, there had never been any question of sharing it. But Prinakov had been delighted to use Korov's very special capabilities, and had even been so discreet that the whole blame for what journalists ridiculously called the "excesses" had been borne by the dim-witted Molvich when the revolution came. Molvich had been known to be bloodthirsty, and his death in a carefully-staged shootout had provoked an orgy of pious celebration, after which the new president Czernov had been able to carry on business not so very differently from before.

But then Czernov was bound to be safe, given the political apprenticeship he had served. Of course, his successor was a shock to everyone. But Korov recognised the signs; all presidents were more or less alike. She just had to be given time to realise how much Korov could do for her. Besides, she and he had really got on very well. She had even invited him back to the Presidential apartments, on the pretext that without Rimov there was no tea or coffee to be had in the office. She had been delightfully flustered by him, even pouring coffee into his cup when he had clearly asked for tea. But most importantly of all, she had given him the crucial signal. "Oh, Rimov is such a pain sometimes", she had said in exasperation when he had asked some innocent question about her movements for the following week.

Well, Rimov would be a pain no more. Korov would see to that. For her sake. At least, it was for her sake, but Kirov had to admit that it would cost him personally very little. Frankly, Rimov had been a worry to him ever since that arrogant man had nearly uncovered the profitable little trading operation Korov ran on the side with the head of the Palace kitchens. It would have been just like Rimov to make some ridiculous scene.

He had come to this meeting with carefully lowered expectations. No one could accuse Konstantin Korov of being unrealistic. But there was no doubt she had encouraged him, and he would certainly be worthy of her. Just as she was certainly worthy of him. All his life Korov had been searching for a woman who would not let him down. He was nearly fifty, and he had all the trappings of material success, but so far that had eluded him. Now it seemed he had found her. He felt quietly confident that she would not disappoint him.

## Chapter 7

### Phone calls

It was eleven-thirty in the morning, and the archbishop was seated at his desk staring at the telephone.

It was a 1950s Bakelite telephone of the kind that was apparently becoming a collectors' item in the West. An energetic entrepreneur in Vilnitz had already signed large contracts with several government departments to rip out their old handsets and ship them to antique dealers in Germany and the United States, whence they would no doubt be shipped back again once the fashion for them returned at home. The archbishop had so far resisted buying a modern electronic handset. One reason was his fastidiousness about succumbing to the pressures of advertising, a fastidiousness that naturally increased the more persuasively these pressures acted upon everyone around him. Half the goods available on the market seemed designed to help people employ the time made frighteningly empty by the labour-saving devices that constituted the other half. Car manufacturers advertised power steering to take the strain off people's arm muscles, requiring manufacturers of sport equipment to find ever-more ingenious ways of helping people to build those muscles back up again. And then there were those – well, stockings. On his way to see Rudi yesterday the archbishop had passed the same corner where he had first set eyes on Poster One. He had not intended particularly to scan the hoardings along the route; indeed he felt quite relaxed about the whole thing now. But the discovery that this same hoarding now advertised a brand of stockings called "President" struck the archbishop as in particularly poor taste. Presumably - no surely - they had at least employed a different model. Nevertheless. Nevertheless...

To be honest, the second reason the archbishop had not bought a modern handset was that Gabriel usually made his telephone calls for him. This morning, though, he had a particularly important and difficult call to make, and one about which he felt very ambivalent. He was inclined to dither about making it at all. The whole point of having a secretary like Gabriel, of course, was to cut out the temptation and the need to dither. But on this occasion the archbishop had deliberately despatched Gabriel on a time-consuming errand: he was not going to be cheated of the chance to dither on a grand scale.

He could imagine Rudi roaring with laughter when he heard. The man had been in particularly irrepressible form yesterday, and the archbishop had come to feel that Rudi's moods were a kind of inverted weather vane for his own prospects: a cheerful Rudi usually meant bad weather on the way for the archbishop. In fact, since the election Rudi had been in almost continuously good spirits, which found their deranged expression in the gleeful construction of conspiracy theories surrounding the new President. He was convinced that poor Rimov's fall down the fire escape outside his apartment a couple of months previously had been a case of murder. But as the archbishop would have pointed out if there had been any chance Rudi would listen, nothing was harder than to push

someone reliably to their death down a flight of stairs on an icy day, and nothing easier than for it to happen by accident. Now Rudi had become convinced there was a caviar and cocaine ring operating out of the Palace kitchens.

“Where do you get all this stuff from?” the archbishop had asked. “Who are your sources?”

“Never reveal my sources”, said Rudi with an annoying grin.

“Actually, though”, he had said later, when he and the archbishop sat sharing a parting glass of vodka, “I don’t need many sources. Just my brain. I just think what I would do if *I* worked in that place. If there’s a scam that makes sense to me, you can bet someone’s doing it already”.

“I think that just shows how lucky we are you never made it to President”, said the archbishop waspishly.

“I think I prefer having her”, said Rudi.

“So do I”, said the archbishop.

Neither was being in the least sincere.

Now the archbishop had to call *her*. He glared at the telephone. There was no way of avoiding it, really. That’s what came of having a Pope with an eye for attractive young women. The Vatican had been on the line barely as soon as the election result had been announced, asking the archbishop to communicate the Holy Father’s congratulations in almost breathless tones. He’d managed to tone it down in translation, of course. But that irritating young man Felli on the Vatican’s Central Europe desk had hounded him thereafter for reports and prognoses, and now, inevitably, the request had come.

There was absolutely no reason why the Vatican couldn’t communicate with the Presidential Palace directly. Except that, to the archbishop’s acute discomfort, he was widely regarded as the person to whom the President owed her election, and Felli seemed to enjoy reminding him of the fact at every available opportunity.

The telephone sat on the desk like a squat grey toad.

The Vatican was really doing no more than leaping on the bandwagon of her popularity. Since her election she had drawn remarkable crowds, both to hear her speak and even just to see her when she arrived to visit a children’s home or open an exhibition. She was hardly a spellbinding orator, though she had a gift for the reassuringly bland phrase. So it was clearly no more than a fascination with seeing a shapely young woman in an unfamiliar role – a kind of circus act, really. All of the so-called analysis trotted out by television commentators, about how she was giving the country’s women a new self-confidence, seemed to the archbishop just pretentious sociological nonsense. How could

a rich, beautiful woman who had lived abroad for years have anything to say to the solid women of his country, unless they were all in the grip of some collective delusion? And for the Vatican to think it could make itself popular among a godless generation merely by courting *her* showed that the collective delusion had spread very far indeed. The Holy Father would soon be asking the archbishop to preach in discotheques.

On an impulse, the archbishop picked up the receiver. Then he put it down again.

Then he picked it up again. He dialled the number on the pad in front of him.

Underneath the number Gabriel had drawn one of his wittier caricatures. It showed the President, voluminously busty and flashing an improbably wide smile of the kind seen only in toothpaste commercials. She was holding a telephone to each ear. She was drawn only from the waist up: the rest of the sketch was clearly not meant for the archbishop's eyes.

The switchboard put him through to the President's private office. There was a new Presidential Secretary, a Mrs. Lentov. Her appointment had caused quite a stir, he recalled: not only was she the first Presidential Secretary to come from outside the civil service, but she was a former actress, who had worked for the last three years in public relations. She was also the first woman to occupy the post. She was reputed to be capable of great brusqueness, though stories varied. He did not, of course, speak immediately to the Presidential Secretary but to the Secretary's secretary, who on learning of his identity put him through to the Secretary herself.

"I'm afraid the President has meetings for the rest of the day", said Mrs. Lentov. Of course. Presidents usually did.

The archbishop could almost hear her adding: "And do you always make your own calls, archbishop?" He began to regret having sent Gabriel on his errand.

"I have a communication for the President from the Holy Father himself", said the archbishop. "He most expressly desired me to communicate it to Her Excellency directly".

It was arranged that the President would call him back at 2.30 that afternoon. This was a long enough delay to annoy him extremely, while giving him the frustrating sense that, from a President, it hardly constituted the kind of rudeness one could complain about. Still, he reflected, Czernov had usually called him back much more promptly. The times were changing. Or maybe Czernov had simply had more on his conscience, more reason to stay on good terms with an archbishop.

If that were the explanation, he had no doubt she would start to return his calls much more promptly as she began to settle into the job.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Eight hundred and four calls logged by the switchboard yesterday”, said Irina Lentov, running methodically down her list. “Sixty-two of those from government departments. Eighteen bouquets of flowers. Six hundred and thirty letters and faxes. Forty-eight requests from organisations, thirty of those being requests for visits. The rest just asking for money. Three hundred and forty-seven personal letters, ten per cent hostile, another ten per cent obscene. Twenty-eight of the rest being proposals of marriage. Seven with photographs, only two passable. We’re filing the best proposals away in case you should be interested one day”.

“And how will you be classifying the archbishop’s call?” asked Lidia.

“Proposal of marriage, of course. Indirect, naturally. I’m not sure he realised it himself”.

“I *am* glad to have you here to tell me these things”, said Lidia with a grin. “What did you fix with him?”

“I’m coming to that”, said Irina. “The point is, you asked me to give you a breakdown of all the invitations from the last month so you could decide among them systematically”.

Lidia nodded. “Thank you”, she said.

“So here they are. There are three lists. Of serious invitations, I mean. We’ve already had to weed out about eighty per cent. The first list is home invitations. The second one is foreign official invitations, governments and so on. The third is foreign private invitations. Mostly charities, but some pretty weird ones as well. Obviously you’ll need to co-ordinate your acceptances of the private and the official ones”.

“I’ll take this away and think about it”, said Lidia. “Still, I said yes to the archbishop, so you’ve presumably fixed something up”.

“I found a couple of days provisionally next month. Is that okay? He’s going to tell the Vatican, and they’ll get back to me in the next day or two”.

Lidia nodded again. “Okay. He said something complicated about how His Holiness might want to come later and visit his flock. I take it that means a return invitation?”

“Yes. If you go there, and manage to be civil to each other, His Holiness might wish to come here. Even if you don’t manage to be civil to each other, we shall issue a communiqué saying that everything has gone splendidly. So he’ll get a return invitation anyhow”.

“I see”, said Lidia. “Anything to stop me from having a frank conversation with His Holiness about the position of women in my country, and how the Church could do more to improve it?”

“Nothing at all”, said Irina with a smile. “Except two thousand years of tradition and all the rules of diplomatic protocol. I’m sure those won’t put you off”.

“Oh good”, said Lidia. “I was afraid there might be some more serious obstacle. Now tell me about tomorrow”.

“Here’s the schedule”, said Irina, leaning forward to pass over a single typed sheet. “It’s mostly self-explanatory. But there are briefing papers in your box for two things. One is that the Palace general manager wants you to put in a bid for a really big increase in the Presidential household budget. Thirty per cent above inflation”.

“Oh?” said Lidia. “Why?”

“Well, you’ll see in the papers. But between ourselves, the word is out that you’ve got Budjevsky so frightened he’ll do anything you ask for. So I guess the Palace management just want to press home their advantage. Of course they’ll put it all in terms of needing to present a modern outgoing face of the Presidency. Good public relations and so on. But they’re just defending their turf. Like everyone in this country”.

“So they think a thirty per cent rise while everyone else’s standard of living is going down would count as good public relations?” said Lidia. “And I thought I was the one who was supposed to be politically naïve”.

Irina looked steadily at her. “Don’t assume they necessarily have your best interests at heart”.

“You mean if they persuade me to do such a dumb thing, and I succeed, they’ll get the benefit of the big budget. But if I fail, they won’t be the ones who get the blame”.

“Exactly”.

“Mmm. Thanks for the warning. You also mentioned a second thing”.

“Yes. It’s to do with the annual joint meeting of the World Bank and the European Bank in Vilnitz at the end of next month. They want you to address them. Plus various other things. You’ll see”.

Oh yes, she remembered now. Emilia would be there.

Lidia scanned the list of appointments carefully. Irina had put a helpful note beside each one: “You’ve met him before, at the opening of the Agricultural Machinery

Fair...Top man in the Turnip Growers' Association...Claims to have met you in New York...Environmental activist (tough reputation)..." She paused. "What do the people from TV1 want?"

"Oh, sorry, that was bad briefing. I should have said. They're not interviewing you. They're sending a cameraman to discuss a documentary they want to film. You agreed to it last month".

"Did I?"

"Grigor Moratis asked you".

"Oh, that one. Yes, of course".

"I think they'll mostly discuss things with the general manager. But they'd like a few minutes with you at the end. It's your last appointment anyway. You can be as brief as you like".

Lidia scanned up the list again. Then she frowned.

"What does Korov want?"

"He wouldn't say. But he's been pressing for an interview for some time. Very insistent man".

"Can you try and find out? My last meeting with him was a disaster. I had no idea what he was talking about".

"I'll make enquiries and let you know in the morning", said Irina. She was a professional to her fingertips, thought Lidia, but even so Irina could not entirely hide the fact that interrogating Konstantin Korov was a far from agreeable prospect.

"Thank you", said Lidia. The clock on the wall of the office said five minutes past nine. "I'm glad not to be going out this evening".

"You still have Mrs. Zemeniova to see".

"Yes, of course. I hadn't forgotten".

In truth she had forgotten completely. Irina had been in the job only two months, but already she recognised the signs.

Lidia and Maria had a simple supper in the small kitchen of the private apartments. "I wish I could say I'd cooked this for you", said Lidia as she took out of the oven a roast loin of veal and laid it on the table beside the green salad in its large wooden

bowl. "I've given the housekeeper the evening off. But she did everything before she went".

"Oh, I'd hardly expect the President of the Republic to cook for me herself", said Maria.

"It's not for you I wish I could say I'd done it", said Lidia. "It's for me. You know, a lot of my fellow-models can't even boil an egg. They've always had everything done for them. Some of them have never been shopping for anything except clothes. That's one reason why it's so terrible when they get too old to work. I've always managed to keep myself in training for the world outside. You know, the world afterwards. And now look what's happened".

"Strange you should still talk about your fellow-models", said Maria. "I doubt if many of your fellow Presidents are much good in the kitchen either".

"You've met more Presidents than I have. I'll take your word for it".

When the meal was finished Maria took out her tape-recorder. "Right?" she said.

"Right".

And so the interview began.

It was a relatively routine interview. The first three months of the presidency. A recapitulation, a taking-stock. Lidia was aware that the achievements seemed meagre, but so had the expectations. Except there was her extraordinary popularity. A seventy per cent approval rating in the latest poll, even though everyone knew it was no more than electoral afterglow. That didn't seem quite enough to boast about, on its own. Only what else was a non-executive president to do, expect to be popular?

It lasted forty-five minutes, and then Maria switched off the tape recorder. "Thank you", she said.

For a moment neither of them moved. It was a moment both women had known they would find awkward.

Then they both moved at the same time. Maria reached forward to gather in her tape recorder. Lidia got up and sat on the edge of the table next to Maria, one leg on the floor and the other curled behind it.

"I'm sorry", said Lidia. "Was that a very dull interview?"

Maria laughed, as if in release of tension. "Yes, it was, rather", she said. "Not your fault, though".



Lidia laid her fingers on Maria's outstretched hand. Maria neither removed her hand, nor returned the gentle pressure of Lidia's fingertips.

"I'm still getting used to the change", said Lidia.

"We all are", said Maria.

Everything had to be deliberate, Lidia realised. Presidents could not even sneeze without a reason. She could never leave others to make the pace, never take a step without being quite sure.

She picked up Maria's hand and stroked the fingers gently. Again, Maria neither encouraged nor resisted her.

"I realise we've not spent any time together since before the election", said Lidia. "I also realise you must resent the fact that it's taken an official meeting, an interview, to give us the chance to do so".

Maria said nothing. She was not making it any easier.

"All I can say is that it's no different from the way it's always been. In that respect at least, my life hasn't changed much. I've always neglected my friends. I've been lucky to have tolerant friends. But I've never forgotten them".

For the first time Maria responded. She turned her hand upwards and engaged with Lidia's fingers. The lightest of touches.

"I know it's completely unrealistic to think that with some people I could carry on as though the election had made no difference. But there are some myths you have to believe to stay sane. This is one of them".

Maria nodded. "I see", she said. "At least, I think I see". She paused, and drew in her breath slowly. "It's pretty unequal. I mean, I can't really ask anything of you, and you can ask everything of me".

Lidia shook her head. She looked pained.

"No, of course you can't. I shouldn't have said that", said Maria. "Okay, I'll try and help you keep your myth alive. I'll carry on as though the election had made no difference. I'll treat Lidia like any other friend. And the President like any other President".

"That's it. A courageous dedication to the impossible".

\* \* \* \* \*

“And here is where the fabric is woven”, shouted the factory director above the clacking of the looms and the whirring of thousands of spools. They had come through from the dyeing shop, past vivid piles of thread in gold, crimson and a deep velvety green. Before them workers crouched intently over row upon row of mechanical looms extending across the factory floor until they were lost untidily from view behind archways, pillars and doors.

The Presidential party moved slowly through the noise and the mess. The director was reeling off statistics as though trying to outdo the spinning machines they had just visited on the floor below. “We produce over 10,000 tonnes of fabric every year”, he said. “We have exported to markets all over the world, from Azerbaijan to Zambia. We have one hundred and fifteen different patterns, each in a variety of shades. Our capital investment is approximately....We give employment to....”

Lidia was nodding, apparently intently. It was a movement whose every nuance counted, and she had worked hard to make it balanced and gracious. For her it was already the thousandth time or more; for them it was probably the first.

A few minutes later they returned to the director’s office for tea, which Lidia accepted with gratitude, and spiced biscuits, which she declined. She was presented with a small plaque inscribed in commemoration of her visit. Then the director handed the proceedings over to the finance director, an intense man with oily skin and a walrus moustache. He began to demonstrate various charts and graphs on a poster attached to the wall in front of them. Since Lidia’s encounter with Budjevsky she had had to endure quite a few of these.

After the presentation, as they were about to leave, Lidia asked the factory director: “Do you have any women among your senior managers?”

The director looked embarrassed, as though suddenly aware this was a question he should have anticipated.

“Well, yes”, he said. “Mrs. Borisova is our production director”.

“May I speak to her?”

A fractional pause. “I will send for her”.

It took about a minute and a half for Mrs. Borisova to appear. She was a tall woman, in her early forties perhaps, with grey eyes and a very pale skin offset by lightly flushed cheeks. She seemed slightly out of breath.

Lidia asked her how long she had been production director, and where she had trained. Mrs. Borisova answered her awkwardly.

“Have times been hard for the factory in the last few years?” asked Lidia.

“Very hard, Your Excellency”.

“How much fabric did you produce last year?”

Mrs. Borisova shot an anxious glance at the factory director. “Just under a thousand tonnes, Your Excellency”.

Lidia frowned.

“I think I remember hearing that you can produce up to ten thousand tonnes a year”, she said. “Is that right?”

“Yes, Your Excellency”.

“So you’ve been producing less than ten per cent of your capacity?”

“Yes, Your Excellency”.

Lidia thought hard. And fast.

“Have your workforce been suffering layoffs?” she asked.

“They’ve been on temporary leave, Your Excellency”.

“Without pay?”

“Yes, Your Excellency”.

“For how long?”

“Six months, Your Excellency”.

Lidia swallowed.

“And the people we saw upstairs. In the weaving room. When did they return from leave?”

Mrs. Borisova shot another despairing glance at the director. His face itself appeared to have taken temporary leave.

“This morning, Your Excellency”,

“I see”, said Lidia.

There was an extremely awkward silence.

Then Lidia smiled. “Mrs. Borisova, thank you very much. This visit has been most illuminating”.

She turned to go, and there was a general sliding towards the door on the part of all of those present, as though the polished floor of the director’s office had been imperceptibly tilted.

As she reached the door, a thought struck Lidia, and she turned back. In a loud voice, she said: “Mrs Borisova, I’m sure you have an excellent future in this enterprise. I look forward very much to meeting you when I visit the factory again next year”.

“It was the only thing I could have done”, she confided to Irina Lentov later that afternoon. “She’d probably have lost her job otherwise. For telling me the truth”.

On her return to the Presidential Office Lidia had exploded with rage. She had railed against the firm’s management for their farcical pretence of running a factory at full production; she had railed against the Ministry of Industry for selecting a firm it must have known to be in desperate straits; she had railed against the entire government for encouraging the population to treat her like a fool; she had railed against Irina for allowing all this to happen in the first place. Irina herself had listened calmly. Her earlier career had included a famous film role as Cordelia in a modern-dress version of *King Lear*. The film had been shot during the brief liberalisation of the 1980s, and its director had been very nearly shot during the repression that followed. Both the role and the experience of making the film had made her careful how she reacted to the tantrums of the powerful.

“I don’t care how you do it”, said Lidia. She had stopped her pacing round the office and was perched on the arm of the sofa. “But I want people to know there’s no point in just giving me good news. I may be taken in once or twice. But I’m not a fool. I can read the papers like anyone else, and I know the country has big problems. If they keep showing me factories full of happy smiling workers who have plenty of work, I can tell it’s a fake. No more fakes. Is that clear?”

“I can certainly try”, said Irina carefully. “But it’s not as easy as you think. Sure, I can send out a memo to the Ministry of Industry to tell them you’ve had enough good news. So from tomorrow I predict you’ll get nothing but bad news. All the factories will lay off workers the day before your visit so everything looks authentically miserable. It won’t be any more representative, but it’ll be what they think you want. Or I can try and bypass the Ministry altogether, and just deal with everybody individually. But they’ll still plan your visits so you see what they think you want to see. You’re the President. Most people never get to see the President more than once in their life. So that’s what they do”.

Lidia was silent for a moment. She felt defeated. There were times when it seemed to her that Presidents had very little power. And the more power they had over individuals, the less they had over nations.

“What I don’t understand”, she said at last, “is why they should have wanted to pretend everything was going so well. If they’d been complaining all the time, that would have made more sense. They’d have been after loans, or hand-outs, or special favours. Or something. But what do they get out of pretending to be such a success?”.

“I don’t know either”, said Irina. “I know nothing about them really. Maybe they thought the way to get customers is by appearing to be a great success already. Maybe they thought you’d want to redecorate the Presidential Palace and would place a big order with them. Maybe they don’t care whether they’re successful or not, because they’re just a shell company for the mafia. There are lots of those around”.

“Okay, so you don’t know either. I’m sorry. It’s unfair of me to expect you to know everything. But something else still puzzles me. I’m sure if I’d asked you to get me press cuttings about them from the last year or so, you’d have come up with stuff about the terrible problems they were having. It would have been easy for me to check. Why did they think they could fool me so easily?”

Irina smiled. “I think that’s an easier one to answer. We’re not used to having a President who would bother to check”.

“Should I feel flattered by that?”

“I think so”.

Lidia said nothing. She was obviously still upset. Irina glanced at her watch. Time to move on.

“You said you’d welcome a change from good news”, she said, her tone perceptibly more brisk. “I have a couple of things that should please you, then”.

“Yes?”

“The first is that next week there’s to be a march on the palace by a group of coal-miners protesting against redundancies. They want you to save their jobs, and you’ll have to tell them you can’t do that”.

“Just the sort of thing I enjoy”, said Lidia. “And the second?”

“The second is that Konstantin Korov is due to see you less than five minutes from now”.

## Chapter 8

### Assignments

By the time Korov came in Lidia was outwardly composed. Korov gave her a confident smile, and pressed her outstretched hand to his lips.

“Your Excellency, it has been a long time since I saw you last”.

“Yes”, said Lidia. “It has, hasn’t it? Well, you know, being President, it doesn’t leave much time for anything. Even breathing, really”.

Korov nodded gravely. Not breathing was a condition which, professionally speaking, he was inclined to take rather seriously.

“I think it would be prudent for us to arrange a regular briefing”, he said.

He had noticed a small flicker of alarm in her eyes as he uttered the word “prudent”. It was a good word, for precisely that reason. He was partial to small flickers of alarm in the eyes of others.

She did not answer immediately. “You think so?” she said after a moment.

“Yes, Your Excellency, I do”.

“Well, let’s talk about it later, with Mrs. Lentov. I’m pretty much in her hands as far as organising meetings is concerned”.

Korov leant forward fractionally. “Ah, yes, Mrs. Lentov. Are you...pleased with the new...arrangements?”

“Yes”, said Lidia. “I mean, poor Rimov. It was terrible, the way it happened like that. But, yes, I’m pleased. Thank you”.

She had thanked him. As well as an understandable gratification at her recognition of the service he had done her, Korov felt a new admiration for her coolness in discussing the matter. So composed. Almost as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

“Yes”, said Korov slowly. “Well, you must tell me if there are any other individuals you wish me to...to take care of”.

Lidia’s eyes had strayed for a moment to the far side of the room. They swivelled back, in the confusion of one whose attention has wandered. “Yes”, she said. “Let me think about that. Now, what are the matters you wish to discuss with me?”

“Well, first, Your Excellency, I understand you are about to see the Palace general manager. I have had a number of discussions with him about the future of the Presidential entourage. I believe he intends to present to you a plan for modernising this institution, for ensuring that the Presidency projects a fully dynamic and up-to-date image in the modern world. This will obviously have budgetary implications. These represent purely trivial additions to the overall expenditure plans of the government, but they are quite crucial to the success of the modernisation plan. It would be most unfortunate, in my judgement, if anything were permitted to hold up the necessary budgetary...”

Lidia held up her hand to halt his flow. “Yes, I see now”, she said. “You’re lobbying me. Quite reasonable of you to try. But I should tell you that I’ve looked quite closely at the proposal, and it’s not on. A 30% increase when the IMF is getting us to cut spending by 5% is completely unrealistic. And I have to say the justifications given by the general manager seem to me very weak. Just citing ‘rising costs’ isn’t going to persuade anyone”.

Korov was silent for a moment, so as not to betray his astonishment at what he was hearing. Then he said: “I think, Your Excellency, you may not – if I may say so – have fully appreciated the security implications of the proposal. Things have changed considerably since the time of your predecessor. After all, when you travel you attract far larger crowds than he did. Entirely understandably, if I may say so”.

Lidia closed her eyes. Gallantry from Korov was more than she could stomach. “I am fully aware of the security issues”, she said. “But I also know that the cost of crowd control when I travel does not come out of the Palace budget. So it’s irrelevant to the argument”.

“Your Excellency, I cited it merely as a general example of the kinds of changed security problem with which we have to deal. The risk of deranged or criminal elements seeking to make an assault on the Palace is certainly greater than it used to be”.

“The place is enough of a fortress already”, said Lidia firmly. “I’m not going to put in a 30% claim, and that’s the end of it. Now what were the other things you wished to discuss?”

Korov was amazed. It was inconceivable that Czernov would have failed to respond to such an open invitation to pad his own budget and to share the proceeds with Korov. He had heard people describe the boldness of the new President, sometimes in flattering and sometimes in hostile tones. Was it even thinkable that she would countermand so direct a request from him, as if she were unaware how much – and how dangerously - she was indebted to him? He moved mechanically to the next item on his list, while his brain cast around for a way to make the situation plainer to her.

“Well, Your Excellency, you know that next month the World Bank and the European Bank are holding their annual joint meeting in Vilnitz. There are many issues, both of security and of protocol, that are raised by this meeting”.

Korov and Lidia spent several minutes discussing the order of precedence of the various finance ministers and other dignitaries who would be descending on the city, whether some of them should be accommodated in the Palace as opposed to the Marriott Hotel, whether a small intimate dinner was compatible with minimal security, whether press conferences could be open to the entire press corps or only to holders of invitations, and so forth. In spite of the unpromising start to their interview, Korov thought the atmosphere of the discussion had distinctly warmed up. They had discovered a shared interest in a certain arcane category of trivia. Both of them were much amused by the petty problems of dealing with so many large egos gathered temporarily in one small place. They swapped several jokes at the expense of other leading politicians. By the end Korov was almost persuaded to raise the question of the budget again. But he was a cautious man, and decided instead to give her another opportunity to increase her debt to him.

“Thank you, Your Excellency”, he concluded. “I think I mentioned earlier that I would be happy to take care of anyone else you particularly wished. Would you like me to do so?”

Lidia looked blankly at him. He had an air at once sinister and pathetic, like a Dobermann desperate to perform a service for her. Still, there could be no harm in making use of this eagerness.

“Well”, she said after a moment, “there *is* someone. She’s called Emilia Karlova and she’ll be coming to the meeting. She’s with the World Bank. She’ll be staying at the Palace, so it should be straightforward. I’d just like to ensure there are no...complications to her visit”.

Once she had said so she felt a slight twinge of regret, recognising that to keep Korov happy she had run the risk of exposing Emilia to the attentions of that loathsome man. She just hoped he would not be too zealous, and would confine his responsibilities to giving her a slightly more luxurious treatment than her status formally warranted. It was good for Emilia to have a little luxury once in a while. It stopped her from being overwhelmed by her own seriousness.

“Very good, Your Excellency”, said Korov. “You need say no more. May I now take this opportunity to remind you that you had agreed to arrange a more regular briefing? In consultation with Mrs. Lentov, of course”.

“Yes”, said Lidia. “May I suggest you call her tomorrow? After I’ve had a chance to talk to her. Tell her I’ve agreed to fix another meeting. Shall we say a month from now?”



“May I suggest a fortnight, Your Excellency? In a month the World Bank meeting will be nearly upon us”.

Korov seemed to Lidia to have an answer for everything.

“Very well. A fortnight it is”.

Korov stood up stiffly, then straightened in a kind of strangulated gesture, as though he wanted to click his heels but was afraid of looking ridiculous. Then he kissed Lidia’s hand. Living in the United States had almost made her forget how often people at home still did that. She was having to get used to it again as President, but she still wondered why the people who kissed your hand were never the ones you wanted to do so.

Korov left the office in a state of some confusion. He was gratified to have been given a new assignment, certainly. Finding a way to remove this Karlova woman would not be entirely straightforward, of course: anyone who worked for an international organisation was prone to have colleagues who would insist on making meticulous enquiries. But that would only add to the challenge. He wondered what the President had against her. Then he recollected having heard rumours about some kind of sexual liaison with a woman who worked abroad; perhaps she was the one. If so he could understand the President’s wish to remove her permanently from the scene. It was quite out of keeping with the dignity of the Presidency to have former lovers turning up merely on the pretext that some international meeting required it. But then, Korov was not sure that women who slept with other women were quite in keeping with the dignity of the Presidency either. He had rather complicated feelings on the subject. Lesbianism was decadent and immoral, certainly, though Korov vacillated as to whether that counted as a point in its favour or a point against. In his frequent visits to the classier brothels in Vilnitz, Korov often booked the girls two at a time. On the other hand, it hardly seemed a desirable vice in the kind of woman you might look up to, respect, admire. He had hoped the President would be just such a woman. He did not relish the idea that he might have been mistaken in her too.

Her stubbornness on the question of the budget was extremely vexing, he had to admit. Apart from anything else, Korov needed money badly. His expenses seemed to rise every month, the list of those whose silence he had bought was now impressively long, and he had always made a policy of doing so generously enough to ensure their silence stayed bought. The payment to Mrs. Liumov had run his cash reserves down to dangerously low levels, and it was a matter of urgency to find additional sources of income. Grabowicz, for instance. He was the catering manager at the palace. He kept whining that it was impossible to find any more margin in the payments for supplies. For the last two years Grabowicz had been overcharging the catering account for the cost of purchased food, and had been splitting the difference with Korov, whose job it was to ensure that nobody complained about furnishing doctored invoices.

Perhaps it was time to pay Grabowicz a visit. The man was lazy. He had hardly made any effort to seek out cheaper sources of supply. As it happened, Korov had recently been given the number of a Romanian who was said to supply extremely cheap caviar, and was rumoured also to be willing to allow his lorries to transport all kinds of other items as well. Grabowicz would probably moan about quality, but Korov doubted whether any of the so-called dignitaries – vain social parasites to a man – who dined at the Palace could tell good caviar from bad, so pathetically excited were they to be dining there at all. In any case, matters were becoming serious. If the President could not be persuaded, Grabowicz would have to be.

Not that Korov had given up hope of persuading the President. All in good time. As he drove his BMW out of the gates of the castle, past the salute of the uniformed guard, Korov fingered complacently at his breast pocket. There, in that tiny piece of concealed electronic gadgetry, were recorded the President's exact words as she had ordered the liquidation of that Karlova woman. This evidence would come in very useful once the assignment had been completed.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was eight-thirty that evening by the time Lidia had completed her penultimate engagement. The interview with the General Manager had been predictably difficult, but she had kept it mercifully brief. After he had been shown out Irina said to her:

“May I ask a favour?”

“By all means”.

“My son is unwell. My husband just called. Could we leave our briefing about tomorrow until the morning? I'll leave the programme for you on the desk. There's nothing particularly alarming for you”.

“Yes, of course”, said Lidia. “Shall we meet at eight?”

“Yes, I'll be there”, said Irina. “Now you've just got one left. The man from TV1. And Ewa is on duty at the desk downstairs if you need anything”.

“That's fine”, said Lidia. “Show him in, and then go home. I hope your son's okay”.

Irina smiled. “It's nothing serious, I think. But boys need their mothers sometimes”.

“I know”, said Lidia. “Or rather, I suppose I don't know, really. But I can imagine. Good luck”.

“Oh, one last thing”, said Irina. “Do you have any idea what a mantilla is?”

“No”, said Lidia. “Why?”

“I’ll tell you in the morning, after I’ve found out”.

When the door opened and Irina showed in the man from TV1, Lidia gave a slight start of surprise. It was the cameraman, Vladimir.

She gave him a broad smile. “Vladimir! This is an unexpected pleasure”.

She really meant it. After Korov, Vladimir’s arrival could hardly have been more welcome.

He smiled, a little shyly. “Unexpected for you, perhaps”.

What a relief he had not called her “Your Excellency”.

She moved towards him and gave him a warm embrace on both cheeks.

“I haven’t seen you wear a suit before”, she said. Indeed, like cameramen the world over, he had always worn jeans.

“You haven’t seen me meet the President before”.

“Well, you’re welcome to take your jacket off”.

“Thanks”.

They sat down opposite one another in the armchairs in the corner. Vladimir flung his jacket over one of the arms of the sofa beside him.

He began to tell her about the documentary he was filming. It was about the history of the Castle, and would be in four episodes. During the final episode he hoped to be able to include footage from an interview with the President. Talking, for once, not about politics but about history, showing the people some of the historic corners of the building that had become her home.

“You’re producing this as well as doing the camerawork?” asked Lidia.

Vladimir looked embarrassed. “No, I’m not”, he said. “We have a producer. It’s just that, well, I was visiting the Castle to discuss the filming with the staff here. You know, which rooms to use, the lighting and so on. And I suggested to the producer that since I knew you, I might put the request to you directly. Of course, I said no more than that”.

Lidia smiled. “Well, you can tell your producer that the idea’s an excellent one. I’d have been delighted to accept even if you hadn’t been the one to ask me. But I’m glad you did come, all the same. Your instinct was sound”.

Instinct, instinct. She was always having to interrogate her instinct in a landscape for which it had not been formed.

After a few minutes Lidia said to him: “Can I ask you a favour?”

“Of course”.

“I gather you don’t just work for TV1. You have a company of your own”.

A fractional pause “Yes, that’s right”.

“Not a TV company, though?”

“No”.

“You make and install surveillance equipment?”

“That’s right. You’re well informed”.

“Oh, these things get around”.

Vladimir smiled. “I didn’t mean to suggest you couldn’t find out that sort of thing quite easily. I’m sure you’re extremely well informed when you want to be. I was just surprised you’d be interested. You must have a lot to do”.

Lidia made a deprecating gesture. “Well, I wanted to ask you a technical question. Do you know the mirrored room?”

“Yes. I was shown it this afternoon”.

“Would you come and have a look at it with me? It’s kept locked, but I have a key”.

“Sure”.

He stood up and turned towards the door. Then he remembered his jacket and bent down to pick it up. Even under the conservative cut of his grey suit trousers, she could see the outline of his bottom.

It was three months since Lidia had slept with a man.

They walked together down the long corridor to the great marble stairway. The mirrored room lay on the next floor, a long walk down the corridor again. It had two locks, opened by one heavy ancient key and one trim modern one. When they were inside and had turned on the lights, Lidia put the modern key into the inside lock and turned it closed.

It was a magnificent room, perhaps fifty feet long, and recently restored at unimaginable expense to the full extent of its eighteenth century power to halt the breath of the unwary visitor. Each panel on the walls was of gilt, with a sequence of alternating oval and rectangular mirrors travelling round a full three hundred and sixty degrees so that the space seemed infinite and packed intensely with light. In the centre of the room lay a long rectangular table covered in green baize. Above it there was no chandelier, unlike in the other state rooms of the Castle, but instead a long oval ceiling mirror; the rest of the ceiling was of simple white plaster. The light in the room came from twenty wall-mounted chandeliers of crystal. Each had a separate switch in the bank by the door, so the room's light could be regulated all the way from a mysterious broken sparkle in the gloom to an explosive brilliance that was felt as well as seen, and was all around them now.

Vladimir took a deep breath. "It gets better every time", he said.

"Yes, it does", said Lidia. "Now what I wanted to ask you was this. When they restored this room, could they have installed any hidden cameras?"

Vladimir did not answer for a moment. Then he said: "Could you turn out about half the lights, please?"

Lidia did so, extinguishing one by one every alternate light. When she had finished the light in the room had a warm sense of balance.

Vladimir began to walk slowly round the room, clockwise from the door, stopping now and then to look carefully at the panels. When he had returned to the door he looked up at the ceiling, scanning the plaster and the mirror in silence for a minute or more.

"It could be done", he said. "But I don't think it was".

"Can you tell, just like that?"

"Not necessarily. Not without instruments. But what I can tell is that it would be a very difficult job. There's only one person in the country they could have asked, and who could do it well enough to fool me".

"And who is that?"

"That person is me".

He said it a little shyly, turning his eyes away.

Lidia raised an eyebrow.

“And?”

“And they didn’t ask me”.

Lidia smiled broadly, a smile that expressed more of the relief she felt than she had really intended to show. She leaned back gently against the wall, a few inches away from Vladimir’s shoulder.

“Thank you”, she said. “I knew it was worth asking you. It always has been before”.

Vladimir turned and looked at her seriously, his eyes full on her face.

Instinct, instinct. It was strange how her instinct for danger was powerless against that other instinct, the one that made itself felt in the humming of her blood. And yet it was not extinguished, but continued blinking at her, impotently, just out of reach.

“You know”, she said, in a quiet, slightly dreamy voice, “becoming President was such an unreal event, so unexpected, that I gave myself three wishes. I’m not talking about political ambitions, great plans for the country. Of course I had those as well. I mean three crazy, private wishes. As though I was suddenly the good fairy and the servant-girl rolled into one”.

“And what were they?”

“Well, to understand my first wish you have to remember that I’ve lived for most of the last ten years in the United States. In the US there are millions of people – and I mean millions - who believe the world is being visited regularly by aliens from outer space. They think ordinary people are being kidnapped. The world’s governments are in a conspiracy to cover it up. They have satellite intelligence confirming the existence of these aliens, but they won’t release it for fear of causing panic”.

“Yes, I’d heard of this”, murmured Vladimir with a smile.

“One of the things about our country”, continued Lidia, “is the way in which the strangest kinds of paranoia have a way of being well founded after all. So my first wish was to do what all these millions of people dream of doing. To get to the heart of government, and to find out. I thought of asking Korov, but,...,well, but no”.

“You know”, said Vladimir quietly, “you shouldn’t trust Korov. Not in anything”.

Lidia hardly took his remark in, though she was to remember it later. “So I asked the Defence Minister. Just like that. Did we have intelligence, etcetera, etcetera. You can imagine it was quite a challenge, finding a way to ask the question without making him instantly doubt my sanity. I had visions of the Supreme Court meeting in secret to have me declared mentally unfit for the Presidency. But I think I found a way to turn it into a joke. A very private joke”.

“And what was the answer?”

“Sadly, it was no. There are no aliens from outer space. None that we know of, anyway. Unless Korov is one”.

“And your second wish?”

“Not yet accomplished. This is strictly a fantasy project. When I was a child I invented a game with my friends. Actually, we invented a whole country. It was called Caspar country. Everyone in it had the same name. They were all called Caspar. Even the women. It was wonderful. You never had to worry about not knowing who people were. Even when you met someone for the first time, you knew their name instantly. You can’t imagine how often I’ve remembered Caspar country since I was elected. Every time I go to some reception, and people’s names are flung at me in dozens, I think how wonderful it would be if I could just say to them, with a big smile, ‘Of course I know you: you’re Caspar!’ So my second wish is to pass a law requiring everyone in the country to change their name to Caspar”.

“Now that probably *would* have you declared insane”.

“I dare say”.

“And what was your third wish?”

“Also a fantasy project. Though in a different sense”. Lidia turned full face to Vladimir. Instinct, instinct. He stood very solid before her, leaning slightly against the wall. She put out her hand and touched the knot of his tie. Then she flicked her finger underneath the tie and ran it slowly down his shirt-front to his belt. He did not move. She lifted her finger again and gently touched his forehead, then ran it down the bridge of his nose to lay it on his lips.

“My third wish”, she said, in a whisper, “was to make love on the table in the mirrored room”.

Vladimir smiled at her. “May I have your permission to turn down a few more lights?”

As she watched his long, confident arm reach out for the bank of switches, she reflected that when light has been split by mirrors into a thousand brilliant fragments, in its fading there may sometimes come a resurgence of warmth.



## Intermezzo 8.5

In a bar near to the main railway station in Vilnitz, two hostesses were having a drink and a cigarette. They were off duty and it was not their bar, but the owner was treating them to the drink by reciprocal arrangement with their employer. Of course, it was not champagne, but then the champagne in their own bar was not champagne either. Most of their clients were too pissed or too paralysed with lust to notice, or at any rate to complain.

One of the hostesses was looking out through the drizzle at a poster for President stockings.

“Bloody expensive, those stockings”, she said. Her name was Erika, and she had been a shop assistant under communism; she was much in demand from submissive men who appreciated her surly and obnoxious manner.

“You’re telling me”, said the other, whose name was Magda. She had a Ph.D. in philology, and was known for being able to talk dirty in eleven languages including Turkish and Japanese. “And these days I get through about ten pairs a week”.

“Yeah”, said Erika. “Same here. Ever since the election. The men have gone crazy. I’ve had lots of really kinky stuff. And it’s no good trying to use cheap imitations. They all want those same expensive kind”.

“I think we should get up a petition”, said Magda thoughtfully. “To the President. Get her to model some really cheap stockings, and make our life a bit easier. Or maybe give us some kind of subsidy. Everyone else seems to be getting one”.

“Yeah”, said Erika. “Here, talking of crazy. You know, real crazy. You remember that guy who booked us both a few weeks back? Small guy, black hair. You know, the one who wanted...” and she whispered something in Magda’s ear. Magda gave a squeal of laughter.

“Well”, continued Erika, “you know I didn’t come in last night? That’s cause I was booked on a home job. It was the same guy. Only he’s into really weird stuff now. The stockings are all part of it. And they have to be President brand. Nothing else will do. Luckily I’d told him Volodya was waiting in the car below, with instructions to break down the door if I didn’t come out by twelve. He’s dangerous, though. He’ll kill someone, one day. I had the feeling he was, you know, rehearsing something. If it wasn’t me, it would be someone else”.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. It was a dangerous profession, especially these days. Best not to think too much about it.

## Chapter 9

### Plans

It was shortly after midnight when the telephone rang in Lidia's bedroom. She picked up the receiver cautiously, then relaxed when she heard Emilia's voice.

"I'm sorry", said Emilia. "This is very late to call".

"That's okay", said Lidia. "My message said I'd be up till one a.m."

"Thanks", said Emilia. "Before we talk about next week, I must just tell you that I got my delayed copy of last week's *Voice of Vilnitz* weekly edition. They had that article about your visit to the Vatican. Of course, I'd seen the coverage on CNN. But they never mentioned the mantilla. I thought it was wonderful".

Lidia giggled. "Yes, wasn't it? But not as wonderful as the correspondence there's been since. You won't have seen that yet".

"I can imagine some of it", said Emilia.

"I doubt if you can", said Lidia. "Not in its full glory. Here, give me a moment and I'll find the file of cuttings. It's on the table".

She returned a moment later and picked up the receiver again. "Here's the first letter. Published two days after the article. 'Dear Sir, I read with disgust this morning that the President of our country, having been politely and reasonably informed that it was customary for female Heads of State to wear a black head-dress in the presence of His Holiness, chose to inform His Holiness's staff that it was not customary for President Maliakova to wear black head-dress at all. A more calculated insult to the majesty and dignity of the Holy Office would be hard to imagine. My shock turned to outrage when I turned to the photograph of our President at the ceremony, wearing a skirt barely five centimetres below the knee, and in a truly shocking shade of blue. Our President should realise that she was elected to represent her country and its Church, and not to indulge her own wanton tastes in the matter of dress. I truly regret the day our country took its disastrous step along this heathen course. Yours etc.'"

There was a sound of suppressed hilarity at the other end of the line. "You know", said Emilia with the sigh of someone whose stomach muscles ache, "I'd almost suspect you of planting that letter yourself".

"If I'd known what a flood of retaliatory letters it would provoke, I'd have been very tempted", admitted Lidia. "In fact, I accused Irina of doing exactly that. The message to the Vatican about the mantilla had been her idea in the first place, though naturally I agreed completely. So it seemed rather in her style. But she swore to me she

hadn't planted it. Since then there have been dozens of letters, almost all supporting me, and only three agreeing with the first one. One of the most supportive letters was signed by eight priests".

"Please keep the file for me to read when I come", said Emilia.

"Of course. Though probably now the letters have been filed they'll count as an Official Secret".

"I can get them on the wire service", said Emilia.

"No, I'm only joking. Though it's true I keep stumbling across the most remarkable things that are supposed to be secret. But that's another story".

"How did His Holiness himself react?"

"Well, that's the best bit of all. We got on like a house on fire. I guess we'd both thought it might be difficult, so we were both on our best behaviour. You know, combining plain speaking with our best efforts at charm. There was a photo the editor of the *Voice* thought about publishing, but eventually lost his nerve. Someone sent it to me anyway. It showed His Holiness grinning from ear to ear like a schoolboy".

"So was it all just chat, or did you talk about anything serious?"

"I knew you'd ask that. You're such a puritan about chat. Yes we did. His Holiness said he was most concerned at the rising number of abortions in the country. I said I shared his concern and wished to eliminate the circumstances that made women feel the need to resort to them. I would refuse to support legislation preventing them, but I would give my backing to initiatives in education, family planning and economic improvement, which were the best way to diminish the number of abortions women chose to have. I added that I hoped I could count on his support in as many of these initiatives as he felt capable of supporting. He thanked me for my frankness and changed the subject".

"Good for you".

"Well, actually, that makes him sound a bit of a coward. We talked later on quite a lot about problems of women's employment and so on. I even got him to promise that when he makes his visit here, he'll visit some women's employment projects. He sounded pretty reasonable and positive about it".

"You surprise me".

"Well, everything's relative. He's an old man".

"So how are the preparations going for the conference?"

“Oh, it’s chaos at the moment. But we’ll get there. When are you coming?”

“Next Thursday”.

“And leaving?”

“Sunday morning. I have to go to London for a couple of days, and then I have a mission in Genghistan”.

“So you’ll leave right after the final banquet. What a shame”.

“I hate banquets. You won’t see me there”.

“Oh, but you must come. I’ve had such a funny set of conversations with the General Manager about it. He told me the catering manager was very unhappy about serving caviar. I said so was I, but the Bank President’s Office had insisted on it. Apparently the Bank have some kind of project to raise the incomes of sturgeon fishermen by supporting demand for their output. Plus the President is highly partial to it himself. So the catering manager would just have to put up with it”.

“It’s probably the President’s chief of staff who’s insisting. He’s an obnoxious man, and a great fan of caviar”.

“Oh good, I’ll make him sit next to Korov”.

“Who’s Korov?”

“Another awful man. Head of Palace security. Normally refuses to attend functions in person, but this time I shall insist that he comes. I’ll tell him it’s the job of the Head of Security to taste the caviar for the reassurance of our distinguished guests. Actually, I have to apologise to you. He asked whether he should give special treatment to any of the visitors, so I mentioned your name. I hope he’s not too clinging. Just let me know if so”.

“I will. But you’ll still have trouble persuading me to go to the banquet”.

“You can sit next to Grigor. You like him, don’t you?”

“Grigor’s okay”.

“So I’ll see you there”.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Emilia cleared customs at Vilnitz airport she decided not to take one of the buses that had been laid on for those attending the conference. She had no wish to make small-talk with colleagues, and in any case she was heading for the Castle instead of the Marriott Hotel. Instead she joined the short line of those waiting for taxis. After what Lidia had said about Korov, she had been half expecting to see a board with her name on it at the exit from the customs hall, but she was relieved not to have been met. She did not notice the small man with black hair who had been observing her as she stood in the arrivals building, and who now crossed over to the car park and got into a dark blue BMW. As her taxi pulled away the BMW followed behind them at a distance of two or three hundred metres. It did not follow them into the grounds of the Castle, but turned right at the end of the avenue and vanished into the early evening traffic.

Nor did she notice Korov when, early the following morning, she crossed the avenue in her jogging clothes and made for the entrance to Vilnitz Central Park. It was a dangerous crossing, like many in the city, and she was preoccupied with avoiding the traffic. Not that it was heavy; on the contrary, it was light and fast, so that cars would swerve around the corner and speed on, either down the hill beside the castle or sometimes along the little road that ran through the Park. They were often without lights in the morning gloom. Korov was standing on the Castle side, and watched her make her way through the Park gates and begin her gentle, loping stride along the road. Korov did not approve of women who went jogging. He crossed the avenue after her, walked down to the Park gates and watched as she disappeared down the road. He noted the time carefully: it was just after six-fifteen. Women like her were usually methodical in their habits, he had found.

He then walked along the little road until he found the spot he was looking for. A slight widening of the tarmac, a patch of grass where he could wait. And then fully nine hundred metres of uninterrupted straight road through to the other side of the park. That would give him at least three minutes: more than enough.

He would have to be particularly careful not to be seen. This evening he was likely to be introduced to her at the conference cocktail party, and he could not risk her recognising him the following day in the Park, in case anything should go wrong.

In the event, Emilia did not go to the cocktail party. It had been a long, tiring and particularly vapid conference; the kind at which nothing was discussed, but delegates were merely subjected to a sequence of patronisingly superficial harangues from speakers on a raised dais. But even if she had wished to prolong the torture, she had promised to visit her parents, and Friday evening was the best time to do so. As usual, they were curiously formal, and it made her squirm. When she had left the country all those years ago, it was as if she had suddenly revealed them to be powerless and insignificant, not just in relation to the world at large (everyone she knew felt that) but even towards their own daughter. Now they were almost deferential to her, and the fact that it was not consciously vengeful made it hurt all the more.

It also made her uncomfortable to reflect that in the eyes of her parents, and of most of the rest of her countrymen, Emilia had left the country in pursuit of riches and freedom. From the inside her life felt like a prolonged exercise in self-denial. She lived alone, at a physical and emotional distance from those she loved that would never have been her lot if she had stayed. Her work demanded of her, perhaps especially because she was a woman, a steely refusal of enthusiasm, panic, celebration; if devotion was permitted it was of the most impersonal sort. A kind of pride drew her to someone like Lidia, who was incapable of treating her as more than a fascinating and exotic toy. Emilia was not above taking a certain voluptuous satisfaction in her own steadiness, and knew that self-denial may seem a luxury to those whose denial has always been imposed on them by others. But it irked her to be envied, of all things, a life of ease.

For his part, Korov was relieved not to see her at the cocktail party. He was still smarting under the President's insistence that he attend all the functions in person rather than supervising his team of security staff from behind the scenes. His mood would not have been improved by his having to make as unmemorable an impression as possible on that Karlova woman. But in any case, it was just as well that his plan meant she would never get the chance to see him.

So when, on Saturday morning at just after six-fifteen, Emilia left the Castle gates, Korov was nowhere to be seen. She stopped at the corner of the avenue, waited until a particularly fast car had swerved past, and jogged across to the other side, then down the hundred metres or so to the Park gates. She entered the Park and began to make her way along the narrow road. Yesterday she had timed herself at three minutes and eighteen seconds along the stretch to the other end of the park, and she hoped to do better today. It was still twilight, made deeper by the thick overhanging trees, and she could make out only dimly the tiny patch of light in the distance before her.

She was concentrating on her stride, barely aware of passing the car parked by the side of the road to her right, with the hood open and the figure of a man bent over the engine. She certainly did not notice the odd fact that the man was wearing gloves to tinker with his engine on a mild April morning. Still less could she have been expected to realise that the car was stolen, that its breakdown was a pretence, and that the man was Konstantin Korov.

Korov was extremely pleased with his disguise. A man trying to repair a broken-down Autovil was to all intents and purposes invisible, so common was the sight. Furthermore, he had arranged unshakeable alibis for the time the car had been stolen, and for the time between six and seven-thirty that morning. And hit-and-run accidents were so common in Vilnitz these days that it was inconceivable anyone would think to investigate too closely, even if the victim did work for a foreign organisation. He heard Emilia wheezing past him – so unattractive, these women in heavy sweatshirts and trainers on their feet that looked like clogs. He counted to ten, then carefully lowered the hood and looked around. She would be out of earshot by now. He had three minutes left,

but one would be enough. He opened the driver's door, got inside and turned the key in the engine.

The starter motor whirred, and the engine turned and fired. Then it gave a menacing thump, and fell silent again.

One of the eminent economists whose works Emilia had studied while at Harvard had been fond of saying that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Translated into terms Konstantin Korov could understand, what he meant was that there is no such thing as the perfect assassination plan. The very characteristics that made the space under the hood of a stolen Autovil such an inconspicuous place for an assassin to lurk made the car itself an infuriatingly unreliable murder weapon. Korov turned the key again. Again the same mocking whirr, the first firing, then silence. A third time.

Korov was used to thinking fast. He was also a strong man. He quickly released the handbrake, opened the door, got out, reached inside again to place his gloved hands on the steering wheel and began to push. The car lumbered into motion, and slowly began to pick up speed. After about fifteen seconds Korov jumped in, and in a single fluid movement pressed down the clutch pedal and put the car in gear. An instant later he smoothly released the clutch.

The car coughed its way to a halt.

Tenuous though Korov's grip on reality could sometimes be, even he did not toy for more than a fraction of a second with the idea of trying to push the car fast enough to catch up and fatally run down a reasonably fit runner in her early thirties on humanly generated horsepower alone.

So it would have to be Plan B.

Plan B was going to involve considerably greater effort. But at least it required absolutely no reliance on mechanical intervention for the deed itself, even if a certain technological ingenuity would be required for covering his tracks afterwards.

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It was five minutes past eight in the evening, and the great reception hall was beginning to fill up with conference delegates, all trying to identify their places according to the seating plans that had been affixed to boards just outside the two main entrances. Nearly three hundred people would be at the banquet, including the entire Cabinet and the finance ministers of no fewer than eighteen different countries.

Despite Lidia's attempts at persuasion, Emilia was not there. She had a flight to catch at seven o'clock the following morning, which in itself hardly required her to miss

the banquet but was a graceful way of declining to explore her real reasons. The truth was that she was feeling melancholy, a state of mind for which her imminent departure was only partly responsible. After all, these brief and busy meetings with Lidia had been more or less the pattern of their friendship ever since Emilia had left London for America all those years ago. Or was it perhaps the awareness of this very pattern that was making her melancholy now? She packed her suitcase and lay down with a book in her room on the fourth floor of the Castle, far enough from the reception hall to hear no whisper of what was happening there.

Konstantin Korov, however, had been unable to escape. Two hours later he felt the President's debt to him was at risk of becoming intolerably great. Not only had he been obliged to sit next to that appalling and ignorant braggart from the World Bank, who had extravagantly praised the caviar Korov thought to be frankly mediocre, and had gone on to boast interminably of a life principally devoted to ensuring that as few sturgeon's eggs as possible should ever become adult sturgeons. But now Korov was having to listen to the dreadful speeches of one tedious technocrat after another. At least the President herself had spoken briefly and charmingly, and had received riotous applause. But she was followed by Stahl, the Prime Minister, who thought fit to deliver himself of sundry observations on the state of the world at large, and to recommend the principles of his government's economic policy to a great many countries whose results appeared superficially more impressive than his own. After Stahl came Simulov, the Minister for National Statistics, who recounted his crackpot ideas about the use of statistics as a means of generating national self-confidence and community spirit. Korov knew all about the value of Simulov's statistics, since he was personally blackmailing several directors of enterprises that loyally reported impressive output figures to the national office even though they were producing nothing at all. Then came the President of the World Bank; then the Finance Minister of Denmark, whose economic policy was of no interest whatsoever to anyone outside the Danish peninsula except a few thousand Eskimos. Then the President of the European Bank, the one who had insisted on flying to Vilnitz by private plane. And so it went on. Altogether, by the time the banquet broke up Korov was feeling murderous, several distracting hours before he needed to be.

Still, it was gratifying that the security operation had gone without a hitch, and Korov could hand over his charges to Michnik with a clear conscience. Michnik was the man from the Interior Ministry who was in overall charge of security for the conference as a whole, and who had been very petulant about allowing Korov to take any part in it, even in the Palace which was Korov's acknowledged territory.

As it was, Michnik had insisted on organising the security cordon for the buses that would transport the delegates back to the Marriott Hotel. Michnik's men were everywhere in the front square of the Palace. Korov stood watching from a point just beside the main doorway. He was running over in his methodical mind the steps he would have to follow in the morning.

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The Vilnitz Marriott Hotel stands next to the river a little way down from the castle. It has seventeen floors, and is coloured off-white, like a great slab of nougat. It looks as though it is passing a silent Modernist comment on the baroque decadence of the old town beside it. Its ground floor and mezzanine are brightly lit throughout the night, but by about two a.m. almost all of the windows on the upper floors are in darkness. Because of the stunning night views over the river on one side, and over the old town on the other, many of the guests choose to leave their curtains open, so when someone does turn on a light the effect is like a small beacon that can be seen several kilometres away.

If anyone had wished to do anything so eccentric as to sit across the river watching the hotel during the night after the conference banquet, such an observer would have noticed a curious phenomenon. At about four a.m. a light was switched on in a room on the fourteenth floor. It was followed shortly afterwards by one on the eleventh floor, then one on the seventh, and one on the sixteenth. Twenty minutes later a light came on in a room on the twelfth floor, then one on the ninth. By five a.m. fourteen lights had come on, and by six, when the dawn made a tally more difficult to keep, the total had risen to twenty-seven.

Though nobody yet knew it, the explanation lay in a batch of Romanian caviar. It was among those purchased at Korov's insistence by the Palace catering manager from a dealer the key to whose commercial success lay in convincingly repackaging consignments that had passed their sell-by date. The dealer was scrupulous about ensuring that he used only consignments so recently outdated as to pose no significant health risk. Unfortunately, though, the requirement to provide such a large quantity to the Palace at short notice had obliged him to obtain part of his own supply from a sub-contractor who, unknown to him and taking a leaf out of his client's book, had repackaged the consignment once already.

By breakfast time forty-five of the occupants of the Marriott Hotel had spent most of the previous few hours on or very near the toilet. In two cases where the victims were sharing a room severe strains were placed on personal relationships as a result. The malady struck different people at different times, but it was sudden and devastating when it struck. By lunchtime it had claimed another six victims in the hotel.

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Emilia was entirely unaware of these developments when, at five-thirty, she left the side door of the Palace to get into the taxi that was waiting in the courtyard. She was feeling a little furtive. "Wake me", Lidia had said, and had handed her the key that would have given her access to Lidia's room. Instead Emilia had just left the key in an envelope with a short note. "Couldn't bear to disturb the Presidential beauty sleep. You need it. The sleep I mean, not the beauty. Love, E".

More than ever Emilia felt the need to make her transitions in and out of Lidia's existence as inconspicuously as possible. One of the inescapable encumbrances of love is that you become an advocate for the drama of someone else's life. Over the years she had known Lidia she had felt unable to shake off the sense that Lidia's triumphs and failings took place in a grander theatre than her own. At moments when she most resented the lightness of Lidia's attachments, her ability to float unharmed through an ether in which others foundered as though in a turbulent sea, Emilia would tell herself angrily that Lidia was trivial, that she seemed light because she was light, that a life become so banal when once so promising must surely be easy to forget. The key to transcending Emilia's humiliating sense of dependence must lie in seeing Lidia as tediously ordinary. And these little soliloquies had served only to reinforce the very theatricality she sought to scorn; every attachment is a drama of its kind, though in the end most fade untraceably into the fog. Now, thanks to politics, Lidia's life had become incontestably the stuff of highest drama; biographies, doctoral theses, perhaps even Hollywood movies would be devoted to her. Where the little dramatisations of a lover had once been grandiose they now seemed pitifully unambitious; in the indulgence of her interior theatre Emilia felt more than ever alone, an over-earnest performance artist playing to an empty house. She wished her exit from the Palace could have been entirely invisible.

She was under even closer scrutiny than she imagined. The taxi pulled out of the courtyard and turned into the avenue. Two hundred metres down the avenue it passed a parked BMW, which moved out to follow it at a discreet distance. Korov had watched through binoculars as Emilia got into the taxi, and from now on he would not let her out of his sight for more than a few seconds.

The BMW overtook the taxi as it was entering the main airport approach road. By the time Emilia and her luggage trolley had joined the short line at the business class check-in, Korov had already slipped the woman at the desk her envelope of instructions. She did small favours for Korov on a regular basis, many of them entirely legitimately connected with his Palace responsibilities, though she was shrewd enough to realise she ought not to enquire too closely which were legitimate and which were not. This time the slip of paper in the envelope read simply: "Dr. Emilia Karlova, VIP 2. Alone. Priority 1. Please accompany her".

VIP 2 was the back-up lounge used whenever it was deemed a particular VIP should not be exposed to the company of those using VIP One. The facilities in the two lounges were identical, but from Korov's point of view VIP2 had two great advantages over VIP One. The first was that, as he had arranged it, Emilia would be alone in the lounge; any other VIPs leaving at the same time would be directed to VIP One. The second was that the lounge enjoyed access to a service lift, whose shaft gave directly onto the back yard where Korov had parked his BMW with the trunk conveniently open. At this time of the morning the yard would be entirely deserted.

Korov in the meantime had used his security pass to let himself into the administrative corridor on the mezzanine floor, and his set of keys to enter an empty

office overlooking the arrivals hall. He switched on the computer, logged on to the booking network and gave a security password. Then he typed in the flight number, and the passenger list came up on the screen. He stopped, turned to the window and waited.

It took five minutes for Emilia to reach the desk. Korov could hear nothing, but the routine was so familiar to him that he recognised exactly the moment when the woman at the desk began to say: "And now Dr. Karlova, we are pleased to offer you the exclusive facilities of our special VIP lounge. My colleague here will accompany you".

"Thank you", said Emilia. "Am I allowed to stop at the duty-free?"

"Yes, of course. Have a pleasant flight".

Emilia picked up her handbag and raincoat from the trolley and then followed her guide, a tall dark woman in her twenties, who walked with her towards passport control.

Korov watched until the woman at the desk had begun entering the details for the next passenger in the business class line. Then he typed in a series of commands that, when the flight closed, would remove the name Karlova completely from the list of passengers, thus ensuring she would not be missed when the cabin staff came to count heads in the aircraft. He would have to return to the office to restore her name to the list after the flight had left, so that any subsequent enquiries would conclude she had disappeared after disembarking for her stopover in London. The only remaining problem was her luggage. The VIPs' luggage was kept on a separate trailer to be loaded last (so as to be unloaded first at the destination airport). Korov knew from long experience exactly when this trailer would be taken out to the aircraft, and realised he had at least twenty-five minutes to intercept her single suitcase. Fortunately the man in charge of the VIP trolley was also a trusted Korov ally.

Emilia lingered for a few minutes in the duty free shop. She had not particularly intended to buy anything, but resented being shepherded about the airport by officials. Eventually the woman's silent reproach overcame her stubbornness, and she smiled at her and said: "Sorry about that. Let's go".

The woman led her up an escalator and along a corridor and then unlocked a door. She began the explanation she had learned by heart: "Here you will find newspapers, telephone, fax machine, tea, coffee and other refreshments. Please accept these with our compliments. Your flight will be announced. Boarding commences in approximately ten minutes. Please press the call button if you need any further assistance".

"Thank you", said Emilia. The woman smiled mechanically at her and left. Emilia picked up a copy of the *Financial Times* and sat down on the sofa with her back to the door.

The woman walked along the corridor and descended the escalator. Korov was watching her from behind a pillar. The detour to the duty free shop had narrowed his margin somewhat, but he still had plenty of time.

When she had disappeared he walked confidently out to the escalator, up to the corridor and along to the door at the end. It was the entrance to VIP 2. Selecting a key carefully from his copious bunch he opened the door, slipped silently inside and turned the lock behind him.

## Intermezzo 9.5

At the back of a dark brick tenement of the outskirts of Vilnitz a stout man in baggy trousers and a string vest stood surveying a pile of roofing tiles, damaged furniture, lengths of drainpipe, plastic sheeting and assorted debris. He had woken up early with a leathery palate and a stabbing pain behind his right eye. He had stumbled out of bed, trying clumsily to avoid waking his wife Stefka, who had already screamed at him for disturbing her when he returned home drunk the previous night. This reproach struck him as unfair, since as far as he could tell their daughter Anna had been just as drunk when she arrived home ten minutes after him. Perhaps what made the difference was the fact that she slept in a different room. But no, it couldn't have been that, since Stefka had announced (though that word hardly did justice to the ferocity of her delivery) that she was going to sleep in the other room so as not to be next to her husband's revolting carcass. In which case, what had she been doing next to him when he woke up a few moments ago? Or had he been the one who went next door? In which case where was Anna? He was still only half awake, and much more than half confused.

She had called him a fool, too, he dimly remembered. He had to admit that the unprepossessing heap of objects in front of him did not exactly add up to a stock of working materials worthy of a professional builder. He had promised her that the whole point of accepting this job as a long-distance lorry driver on starvation wages was to be able to pilfer enough goods to set up in business on his own. Stefka had affected to notice only the drop in the wages he brought home, and had sneered that he would be unable to pilfer enough to furnish a junkheap. It hurt him to acknowledge that she was probably right. And it was too late now to ask for his old job back.

An overweight black and white cat he had not seen before was sitting on the tiles at the top of the wall separating him from the linen factory next door. He had laid the tiles himself only last week, thinking to please Stefka, but had succeeded in eliciting only her scorn for unnecessarily prettifying a wall the rest of which was so tatty and precarious it would soon need to be pulled down and rebuilt. As he watched, the cat plopped complacently down onto the ground and relieved itself on the weeds pushing up through cracks in the concrete. The suggestion was compelling, and he lumbered over to do the same, scaring the cat away through a hole in the far corner of the wall.

Stefka had been impressed, it was true, by his latest trip. "Caviar for the palace", he had told her, tapping the side of his nose with his forefinger to indicate that this was a somewhat hush-hush assignment. (He had not, of course, dared to tell her that its being hush-hush was nothing to do with the caviar, and everything to do with the extra packets loaded into the wheel hubs during a stop late on Thursday night several kilometres before the Romanian border.) Indeed, on the subject of the President both Stefka and Anna seemed not just easy to please, but to have lost all sense of proportion. If only they devoted as much attention to choosing politicians as they devoted to choosing their clothes. Giving someone your vote was a cheap enough gesture to make, but it had a way

of costing you in the end. Though come to think of it, it was costing him too, and he hadn't even voted for her. Christ, life was unfair sometimes.

They all thought he noticed nothing. It was an easy mistake to make. He was one of those unremarkable men who blend into the background anywhere – on a bus, on a building site, in a supermarket, beside a truck. Especially beside a truck. Anna thought he did not notice her shoes or her expensive perfume, which she could certainly never have bought on her own wages. Stefka thought – well, he no longer knew what Stefka thought. Mr. Korov thought he was a loyal employee – or at least one lacking the courage and the imagination for disloyalty. Yet he saw how Korov was cheating, and was being cheated too. Everyone was cheating everyone else, and they were all so pleased with themselves that they failed to notice what was being done to them in turn. Perhaps it was the only way to live with the other kind of failure.

He knew – Korov had not told him, but he knew – that the man who drove the truck before him was now dead. Dead through being too inquisitive, and insufficiently observant. The man's body lay underground in the cellar of the linen factory, barely thirty metres from where he now stood, feeling flabby and nauseous against the dusty surface of the wall. That was the spot reserved by Korov for those he wished to disappear. One of the spots, anyway; perhaps there were others. He could tell when a new corpse was due, because Korov would make a visit, usually at night, to prepare the ground.

Korov had made just such a visit yesterday afternoon. It was unusual for him to come during the day, but a Saturday afternoon was quiet enough in that part of the city. Perhaps Korov was just becoming more arrogant, or failing to notice that there were people living next door.

He gave a slight shiver, though there was no breeze. He thought of his daughter Anna, stepping out confidently into a terrifying world. There was nothing he could do to help her now, and she would despise him for trying.

It would soon be time to piss again. It was hardly worth going back to bed. Besides, he felt his curiosity growing; he did not want to be asleep when Korov arrived with his latest cargo. Perhaps such curiosity was what had killed the other driver, but frankly, with a throbbing head and a body that felt full of sand, he had ceased to care.

Above him there was a calm and clear sky. It seemed one of those days chosen by God for the nursing of hangovers, and the disposal of inconvenient corpses. He stumbled over to the heap of tiles, lit the last cigarette from the crumpled pack in his rear pocket, and settled down to wait.

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Konstantin Korov would have been surprised to discover how closely he had been observed. Those who knew Korov all agreed that, physically at least, he disliked drawing attention to himself. He preferred to move quietly through crowds.

As it happened, none of Korov's large acquaintance was present that morning when he left VIP 2. They would have been very surprised if they had been.

It was barely ninety seconds after he had entered the lounge. Anyone standing outside the door would have heard a frantic scrabbling, the sound of the lock being drawn. The door swung open and Korov came out, white-faced and panting. He limped hurriedly along the corridor and down the escalator. He almost sprinted the thirty metres diagonally across to the men's room, colliding glancingly along the way with a baggage trolley belonging to the wife of the President of the World Bank.

"Well!" said the wife of the President of the World Bank, in astonished tones.

Konstantin Korov had just become the forty-ninth victim of the Romanian caviar.

In the calm of VIP 2 Emilia had been entirely unconscious of Korov's entrance. She had heard a sudden groan, then a scrabbling at the door, and had been aware of the door's opening suddenly. After a couple of minutes she had got up, closed the door, and sat down again. Then, when her flight was called, she had picked up her handbag and raincoat and made her way down to the gate. There followed five minutes of confusion as her name seemed to have been omitted from the passenger list, but the evidence of her boarding card was undeniable and a phone call by the gate attendant was enough to see her through. Twenty-five minutes later she was safely in the sky on her way to London. By the time she had landed again, the man watching the linen factory had fallen asleep.

Had Emilia ever known how close she came to death, she would have been particularly gratified to learn that when Korov reached the men's room, all the compartments were occupied.

## Chapter 10

### Allegations

The summer of that year was one Lidia would come to look back on as an enchanted time, when by comparison with later difficulties she seemed unable to do anything wrong. That was not, of course, how it appeared to her when she was actually living through it. There was the episode of the caviar, to begin with: not just a major diplomatic incident, but a small human tragedy as well when the catering manager at the Palace committed suicide. In his suicide note he took the blame for the whole *débaclé*. He even added that he blamed himself all the more for acting against the express instructions of Mr. Korov, who had always insisted that presidential security demanded the most scrupulous attention to quality of supply. His widow verified the authenticity of the handwriting on the note, thus quashing rumours of a conspiracy. She was subsequently observed driving around Vilnitz in a new Mercedes, so it was comforting to know that her husband's foresight in the matter of insurance had not left her and her children destitute. Finance Minister Budjevsky, citing "intolerable budgetary pressures that must have contributed to this senseless tragedy", proposed a 30% real increase in the Palace budget without consulting the President. Lidia (who had escaped the food poisoning herself) could hardly do anything to prevent it, though she would dearly have liked to because of the evident pleasure it caused Korov. Nevertheless, she was gratified to note that Korov had in general been more subdued in his manner towards her, even apologising profusely after the caviar incident, saying he felt he had personally let her down. This was a matter on which she did not contradict him as much as she felt fairness would strictly have required.

Then in the early summer the government fell, and Lidia suddenly had to win her Presidential spurs in the only serious job the constitution assigned to her. Inflation was still running at 20 percent per month, and unemployment was rising steadily. Pessimists were beginning to say loudly that there would be no end to this recession induced by the dangerous flirtation with Western capitalism, and to express an insistent if entirely vague yearning for a "Third Way". But it was not these issues that caused Stahl's government to lose its vote of confidence in early June. It stumbled instead over a proposal to redesign the country's flag, removing *inter alia* the colour green, a small and unsightly patch of which had adorned the top right corner of the flag for decades. This was possibly the only proposal that could have united in opposition the Ecology Party and a small, viciously nationalistic splinter group called Right Arm. These allies of convenience withdrew their support from the governing coalition not just for the vote on the proposal itself but for the vote of confidence that followed. There succeeded six weeks of tortured negotiations at all hours of the day and night, in which the representatives of various parties scuttled to and fro between Parliament and the Presidential Palace. Almost all of Irina Lentov's energies were devoted to the sole task of ensuring that sworn enemies did not meet inadvertently in the corridors of the castle.



The reason the bargaining was so protracted was that all concerned were convinced that to be Prime Minister at that juncture would be the kiss of death, politically speaking. So the race was on to find the most unpopular member of the entire Parliament who was nevertheless popular enough to lead a properly constituted political party. Eventually all were forced, by physical exhaustion rather than strict logic, to acknowledge that the most unpopular member of the Parliament was, for reasons too obvious to enumerate, the outgoing Prime Minister, Stahl himself, who was therefore re-appointed to the job by the President, to universal relief. The satirical weekly *Dog Eat Dog* commented that, by repeated application of the same logic Stahl could confidently expect still to be Prime Minister in the year 2020, an observation he did nothing to discourage. Stahl reshuffled his cabinet, swapping pairs of ministers known to detest each other, and won the ensuing vote of confidence by a historically unprecedented margin.

Among the many lessons learned by the President during this episode was the curious fact that a high proportion of apparently intelligent male parliamentary deputies began to conduct themselves like embarrassed schoolboys when forced to talk politics seriously with an attractive woman younger than themselves. Fortunately Stahl was an exception, in that he treated everyone impartially like an idiot, and therefore his sense of amused curiosity at the phenomenon that was Lidia Maliakova was entirely inoffensive to her. She thought Stahl must picture himself as some kind of nineteenth century naturalist, a butterfly collector perhaps, forced by a quirk of science fiction to act as temporary Emperor of the Butterflies in the absence of any credible emperor of their own. Fortunately, too, her insistence on regular Presidential briefings from members of the Cabinet had given those individuals some sense of what to expect during serious negotiations with her; it was just a pity they had not been able to transmit that sense to more of their parliamentary colleagues.

Stahl gave her unexpected support over an incident later in the summer, when the country's ambassador in Washington was involved in a car accident in which two young Americans were killed. He had pleaded diplomatic immunity, but several days later the *Washington Post* published the damning results of its own investigation. The article claimed not only that the ambassador had been a known cocaine user, but that he had been secretly recalled to Vilnitz the previous fall on suspicion of trafficking, only to be sent back to Washington without any disciplinary action after the Presidential election. The appointment of ambassadors was formally a presidential function, and although the government in practice took most of the decisions, it was known that Czernov had exercised considerable influence over the choice of appointments. The *Washington Post* had suggested, and the *Voice of Vilnitz* had echoed, that President Maliakova must have chosen to return him to Washington in the full knowledge of his activities.

Lidia was very upset by these allegations, about which she knew nothing whatever. To her surprise and pleasure Stahl made an immediate announcement that the decision to return the ambassador, about which the President would normally have been consulted, had been taken by the Foreign Ministry in the confusion immediately following the unexpected death of Presidential Secretary Rimov. He offered to waive the ambassador's diplomatic immunity, and for good measure fired the deputy minister for foreign affairs.

“That was very decent of Stahl”, she had commented to Grigor.

“Decent?” Grigor had snorted. “It’s just his way of telling everyone loud and clear that however popular you may be, you don’t take any of the important decisions here”.

Certainly, any notion that Stahl might have been motivated by personal loyalty to her was quickly dispelled when the United States, less than a week later, announced a 50% increase in its aid to the country. She also heard, around the same time, that Stahl had been searching for a long time for a pretext to get rid of the deputy minister concerned. But she was grateful for the support whatever its purpose had been.

A papal visit came and went in September, with a lack of controversy that surprised many and disappointed not a few. But the Presidency was embroiled in controversy of a different kind at the end of October. A former native of Vilnitz, who had emigrated to the United States in the 1960s and had become a highly successful cosmetic surgeon, announced his decision to re-settle in the city in order to bring the benefits of his techniques to a population hitherto denied them under communism. He described himself in his press release as a “consultant to actresses, models and presidents”. The *Voice of Vilnitz* led the front page with the story.

“Does he mean me?” demanded Lidia angrily.

Irina Lentov thought carefully before answering. “Well, he only works on women, and there aren’t too many of them who are presidents. But what he actually means isn’t the point. Everyone here who reads it will think he means you. And he knows that”.

“The bastard’s lying. Sue him”, said Lidia.

“Of course he’s lying. But you can’t sue someone just for lying”.

“This isn’t just lying. It’s defamation. And it’s false advertising”.

“Well”, said Irina, “you’d have to be sure you could win the case”.

“Of course I’d win. It’s easy to prove”.

“That’s not what I meant. Though you might regret allowing a court to order evidence from a physical examination of the President. No, the difficult bit would be proving that the statement could only be about you”.

“But it’s obvious, isn’t it? You’ve just said so yourself”.

“What’s obvious to you and me isn’t necessarily obvious to an elderly judge. You’ve met enough of those recently, so you know what I mean”.

“Yes”, said Lidia. “So what should I do?”

“I don’t know”, said Irina. “Maybe just ignore it”.

“Listen”, said Lidia. “This guy’s an American. I’ve lived in America. In America you sue for anything. If I don’t sue him, maybe you’ll assume I’m just being loftily presidential. Above the fray, that sort of thing. But he won’t. He’ll think it’s because I don’t dare. And then he’ll get bolder”.

“You’re not an American. Not now. Not any longer. You’re our President. You have to do things our way. Not his”.

“But Irina”, said Lidia in a tone of frustration, “this guy isn’t selling medicine. He’s selling the knife. To clients most of whom don’t need it, but are doing it under pressure. From husbands, boyfriends, whatever. He shouldn’t be doing this”.

Irina looked at her with an expression of amusement. “You sound like a central planner. If women pay for it, surely it’s none of your business why they want it”.

For a moment Lidia looked very angry with her. Then she relaxed a little. “All I meant is that he shouldn’t use my name. He can sell his own lousy product. But he’s not going to use my name to do it”.

“But that’s the point. He hasn’t mentioned your name”.

There still remained the question what to do. In the event the matter was decided for Lidia, because the *Voice* article produced such a flood of questions from journalists that a generalised and dignified denial seemed the only possible recourse. “In response to recent press stories, the President would like to make clear that she has never at any time undergone cosmetic surgery. Furthermore, she would not normally recommend such a course to others except in cases of medical need”. A considerable correspondence followed in several newspaper and magazines, in which Lidia had to be restrained by Irina from participating in person.

Apart from these periodic controversies, the summer and autumn of that year were notable mainly for the hectic level of that continuous repetitive activity that is the daily lot of heads of state everywhere. Shaking hands, listening to condensed life histories, absorbing tragedies, congratulating winners, inaugurating the infliction of the mostly mediocre products of modern architecture on the public. There were times when she felt herself a drudge, even if the setting of that activity was sometimes exotically displaced: state visits to Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, the United States, Canada, Ireland, the UK, France, Germany, Thailand, Singapore, Japan.

What was hardest to believe, frankly, was her continuing popularity, which seemed independent of anything she actually did. By the fifteenth of November, six months before the new presidential election that would have marked the end of President

Czernov's original term, between 65% and 80% of the public approved of the job the President was doing, depending on which opinion poll you believed. Unsurprisingly, not a single credible rival for the post had emerged even though Lidia had said nothing about her own willingness to stand again.

And then, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, everything changed.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was half-past six in the evening. Lidia had just seen the Slovenian ambassador to the door that connected her office with Irina's. She had shaken his hand, and the ambassador was putting on his coat. Beyond the further door that connected Irina's office with that of Irina's own secretary Lidia could see a man seated; he was her next visitor. But instead of introducing him, Irina said to Lidia in an anxious voice: "Can I speak to you now please? In your office."

There was a final round of handshaking with the ambassador, then Irina closed the door behind him. The two women went into Lidia's office, and Irina closed the door.

"I'm sorry", she said. "I thought I should hold off the man from the Chamber of Commerce. I have a journalist on the line. He's from the *Voice*. He's called Adam Rosati. I don't think you've met him".

From the seriousness in Irina's voice, Lidia knew better than to ask why his call could not wait until later.

"He wouldn't say in detail what it was about. But he did say they were running their lead story tomorrow about some serious allegations concerning the Presidency. He wants to tell you the story and get your reactions directly".

Lidia was quiet for a moment. "You should have said he had to tell you what kind of allegations they were".

"I did. But he wouldn't budge. You can always refuse to speak to him. But I wouldn't advise it".

"You know him? He really is from the *Voice*? He's serious?"

"Well, I don't know him. But I did take the precaution of checking with the editor. He is from the *Voice*. And they really are going to run his story as their lead".

"Okay", said Lidia thoughtfully. "Give me exactly one minute, and then put him through. And make sure the call is recorded".

Irina closed the door behind her, and Lidia sat down at her desk. She lit a cigarette. She smoked very rarely, but she wanted a cigarette now.

There were three telephones on her desk, two modern ones in grey and black and one old Bakelite phone in white. When the red light began winking on the grey telephone she picked up the receiver.

“Hello, this is Lidia Maliakova”.

“This is Adam Rosati, Your Excellency. I work for the *Voice of Vilnitz*. We are running a story tomorrow on which I would very much like your comments. Everyone in the country knows that Your Excellency first came to public attention through a series of advertisements for a brand of foreign stockings”.

He paused.

“Yes?” said Lidia.

“You subsequently appeared on TV1, on a talk show at which you were presented as the model who had appeared in these advertisements”.

“Yes”.

“However, we have recently obtained evidence indicating that the model whose photograph appears in these advertisements was in fact somebody quite different, and that you were quite aware of this fact when you chose to participate in the television programme”.

There was silence for a moment. Then Lidia said: “Can you say that again, please?”

He did so.

“What an extraordinary suggestion”, said Lidia.

“Do you deny the accusation?”

“Of course I do”.

“You maintain that the photographs that appeared in the advertising campaign for SHEEK stockings were of you, and only of you?”

“Yes, of course I do. This is a ridiculous suggestion, and I think you are wasting my time, and your newspaper’s time”.

“Your Excellency, believe me I do not wish to waste your time. May I remind you that these allegations of which we have received evidence are very serious. If true, they would imply that your presidential campaign had been based upon a deception of the electorate. May I also remind you that this is a conversation on the record. So may I ask you once more whether you are quite sure that the photographs of a model wearing SHEEK stockings that appeared in last year’s advertising campaign are of you, and only of you?”

“Yes, I’m quite sure”, said Lidia.

“Then I should tell you that the source of our information is a sworn affidavit from a former employee of the advertising agency *Fist*, which was responsible for the advertising campaign”.

“What does it say?”

“It runs to three single-spaced pages. Would you like me to read it to you?”

“Could you fax it, please?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to do that. I can read it, or I can summarise the contents”.

“Read it to me, please”.

Rosati read out the affidavit. It took nearly ten minutes for him to do so. The gist of it was that the employee claimed to have been one of a group of four people who had decided to invent the fiction that Lidia had been the model in the photograph. Three of the people worked for *Fist*. The advertising campaign had originally used a set of American agency photographs. The model was an American, and the stockings were not even SHEEK. The fourth member of the conspiracy was the television presenter Grigor Moratis. When the archbishop had stated on television that the campaign was the work of foreign corporations, the three had contacted Moratis. They knew that the model Lidia Maliakova, though an American resident, had been born in Vilnitz, was a citizen of the country and had also modelled stockings. She was also known to be educated and articulate, and was likely to make a good impression on Moratis’s television programme. She had agreed to appear, and to connive in the pretence that the photographs were hers. After her decision to enter the presidential campaign she had taken part in a secret photo-shoot, the purpose of which was to create a set of negatives that could be claimed to be the original photographs. But these photographs had never been used. Among the evidence for this was the fact that the American agency had been paid in full for the use of its own photographs, which would not have happened had those used in the campaign been of Maliakova. The author of the affidavit, although sworn to secrecy, had been troubled by this deception. He had eventually decided to follow the promptings of his conscience and to make a sworn statement to reveal what had really taken place.

When Rosati had finished, he said: "That's it". Then a moment later he added: "I should also say that we have contacted the American agency, who have confirmed that they were indeed paid for the use of their photographs".

There was silence, so he asked: "Your Excellency, have you anything to say?"

"Yes", said Lidia. "I deny these allegations completely. I also believe them to be trivial, without importance for the Presidency, and clearly motivated by malice. That is all. Goodbye".

Five minutes later Irina knocked on the door. When she came in Lidia was still seated at her desk, smoking a cigarette. She looked pale.

Irina said nothing. After a moment Lidia said: "I think you're going to have to ask the man from the Chamber of Commerce to come back another day. Give him my sincere apologies. You may tell him some urgent presidential business has come up".

"Very well", said Irina. "There's one more appointment after that. In twenty minutes. A delegation from the Pig-breeders' Federation".

"Oh shit", said Lidia. "I suppose they've come from miles away. Horse-drawn carts and all".

"I'm afraid so".

"Okay, I'll see them. In twenty minutes I'll be okay".

Irina turned to go. "Oh, Irina?" said Lidia.

"Yes?"

"Can you do me favour?"

"Of course".

"A real nuisance, I'm afraid. Can you get hold of the tape of that call, and do the transcription yourself? I don't want anyone else seeing it for the moment. You'll see why. I mean, the allegations are ridiculous, but there's clearly something very organised and very nasty behind it".

"Yes, of course. When do you want it by?"

"Can you do it by later this evening?"

"Yes. I'll be right next door".

“And Irina?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know someone called Chikan?”

“No”.

“He works for *Fist*. Claims to have had a sudden fit of conscience. From my dealings with Chikan, I’d say it was the first time he’d ever been aware of the existence of his conscience in his life”.

\* \* \* \* \*

If Lidia had thought her denial would stop the story, the next day’s events quickly dispelled any illusions. There were several dozen calls to Irina Lentov from domestic and foreign news organisations, as well as from politicians and a fair number of crackpots. In each case Irina issued a brief denial. When Lidia arrived to open a new hospital in the suburbs of Vilnitz, she alighted from her car to be met with a clump of microphones looking like mushrooms after autumn rain. The evening news on TV1 led with the story. It reported that the American modelling agency had confirmed the payments from *Fist*. It then quoted a spokesman from *Fist*, who admitted the payments, but stated that they had been made in recognition of the fact that the photographs actually used had been inspired by those from the agency. Naturally, TV1 used every opportunity to remind viewers what the posters had actually shown.

Lidia called a press conference for the following morning. She spent some time discussing the statement with Irina beforehand.

The conference was held in one of the rooms off the main reception hall. When Lidia arrived, flanked by Irina and one of the security men, she noted with a sinking heart that she had never seen the room so full.

“It’s just the catwalk”, she murmured to herself.

She strode confidently to the podium in front of the assembled microphones. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen”, she said. “It is possible that some of you may have forgotten that today it is exactly one year since my election to the Presidency. In a moment I shall recall for you briefly some of the main features of the year that has passed. I shall also outline for you – again briefly” – and here she smiled her most winning smile to the journalists – “my hopes for the remainder of the term that I have to serve.



“However, I am aware that press stories in the last couple of days may have distracted your attention from these matters. I should therefore like to state categorically that there is no truth in the allegations published in yesterday’s *Voice of Vilnitz* concerning my role in the advertising campaign for SHEEK stockings. The matter is currently in the hands of my lawyers, and I have nothing further to add”.

She went on to give an outline lasting ten minutes or so of her activities during the previous year. There was a certain restiveness among the journalists present – though not nearly as much as there would have been, she reflected, if she had tried to ignore the matter altogether.

“Finally”, she said, “I wish to make an announcement”.

This had been the subject of lengthy discussion with Stahl the previous day, a discussion that had involved repeated telephone calls until late into the night. He had initially been reluctant to allow Lidia to use her press conference to make the announcement, claiming it was properly a government matter. Lidia for her part had maintained it was a constitutional matter, and therefore entirely Presidential. Stahl was swayed in the end, not by logic or emotion or any combination of the two, nor even by Lidia’s most determined efforts at charm, but by the early results of an opinion poll which showed that the allegations had made no dent whatever on the President’s popularity. He had evidently decided she was an asset rather than a liability.

“During the next six months, many tasks lie ahead for our country. I wish to continue our drive towards the modernisation of our economy, towards a reduction in the poverty, misery and unemployment that continue to afflict too many of our citizens, and particularly towards a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of women in our society. These tasks will require efforts on a great many fronts. But it is clear that our general direction requires us to be at the heart of Europe rather than to sit meekly on the sidelines. I am therefore happy to announce that my government will in the next three months make a formal application to join the European Union”.

She then repeated the entire paragraph in English for the benefit of the many foreign correspondents in the room.

The press corps were dramatically underwhelmed. Although the correspondent from the *Financial Times* was seen scribbling furiously in his notebook, the other journalists present yawned and fidgeted, and several looked utterly startled when they realised that was it, her statement was finished. “That was the moment”, Lidia said afterwards to Irina, “when I realised that politicians and journalists have absolutely nothing in common, even though we live off each other. We may be vain and short-sighted. But we think that whether or not we join the European Union is the most important thing to happen to country in the next decade. They think that whether or not this poster is of Lidia Maliakova’s legs is the most important thing to happen to the country in the next ten minutes. And they don’t give a fuck about anything after that”.

As soon as Lidia had sat down the room was a forest of hands.

“Chuck Grimshaw, CNN”, said the first journalist, and continued in English. “Madam President, I’m sure we all appreciate the account you have given us of your achievements in the last year. But I’m sure you also realise that many of our viewers are also asking themselves whether you would have gotten here at all if it wasn’t for that poster campaign. If it is shown that the posters were not in fact of you, will you resign from the Presidency?”

Lidia replied in English as well. Her command of the language was almost flawless, with only a slight accent. “I have already said that the matter is in the hands of my lawyers. I have nothing further to add”.

She then translated the statement back into her own language for the benefit of the domestic press corps. They mostly spoke excellent English anyway, but it was a courtesy of some importance.

“Adam Rosati, *Voice of Vilnitz*”, said the next questioner. He was a pale young man in an anorak. “Your Excellency, since the story published in yesterday’s *Voice* there had been a most important development, to which you have not referred. This is the announcement by the American agency that they were indeed paid for the photographs used in the campaign. Can you please comment on this? In particular, would you not agree that if they were paid for the photographs, this was because the photographs were in fact used?”

Lidia stood up and walked to the podium again. Charm was evidently not going to work. Somewhere at the back of her mind she heard Irina’s warning: “Don’t say anything beyond your denial. Just say it’s in the hands of the lawyers. Nothing else. Absolutely nothing else”. But the warning, like so many warnings in her life, seemed curiously abstract when set against the hard instinctive reality.

“Mr. Rosati”, said Lidia, “I have just made an announcement about the most important single development in the life of our country in the next ten years. You have chosen instead to concentrate on an entirely unimportant question about an advertising campaign for something as trivial as a pair of stockings. I think your readers deserve better from their journalists. I have nothing further to add”.

Rosati stood up again immediately. “Your Excellency, you may consider the matter trivial. Our readers, however, believe that the honesty of the President may be in question. Would you not agree that the President of the Republic should be someone whose honesty is above reproach?”

Lidia stood up again. “Mr. Rosati, it is not at all trivial that someone should have chosen to accuse me of deception. That side of the issue is, as I have said, a matter for the law, and the law will shortly take its course. But the substance of the accusation is of

such triviality that I can hardly believe you are willing to devote your time and attention to it. There are more important things for us to discuss than the advertising of stockings”.

Rosati was on his feet instantly. “Your Excellency”, he said. “You may believe that the advertising of stockings is a trivial activity. May I remind you nevertheless that it is an activity to which you have devoted nearly ten years of your life”.

Bastard, thought Lidia. There was no answer to that.

\* \* \* \* \*

By fortunate coincidence, Lidia was to spend the following weekend, from Saturday afternoon till Sunday evening, at a government-owned lodge in the forest about two hours’ drive from Vilnitz, accompanied only by her mother Tatiana. The walls of the lodge were hung with the spoils of previous presidential house-parties, gazing lugubriously at the President and her mother as if reproaching them for not doing their energetic best to add to the toll.

“That one reminds me of Korov”, said Lidia to her mother with a giggle. It was the head of a small dark roe deer.

“Well, you can make it your goal to have his head stuffed and mounted on the wall next to it before you step down from the presidency”, said Tatiana.

“Some hope”, said Lidia. “I don’t think I have the stomach for this, you know. If people don’t want me in the job, they can keep it. I’ve got less than five months to run”.

“As far as I can tell, people do want you in the job”, said Tatiana in a matter-of-fact way. “So you’ve just discovered you have enemies. That shouldn’t be such a surprise, you know”.

Lidia was silent a moment. “Maybe it’s just that *I* don’t want me in the job. It sometimes seems such a lousy job anyway. All I ever do is sign autographs, cut ribbons and kiss babies”.

“That’s all you ever did in your old job”, corrected Tatiana. At least here you get to make Prime Ministers listen to you”.

“They have to listen to me occasionally, but that doesn’t mean they take any notice of what I say. I don’t take any real decisions”.

“So you’re a spectator. What’s wrong with that? Most of us are. And you have the best seat in the house”.

“It’s the best seat when things are going well. But when they all start throwing rotten fruit, it’s a bit too exposed”.

“Ah, come on”, said Tatiana with a certain impatience. “If it’s such a lousy job, why are people so very determined to stop you holding on to it?”

On Sunday morning they went walking in the forest behind the lodge, with the secret servicemen keeping a discreet distance behind the trees. When they were in the middle of a clearing Tatiana asked, with that ordinary calmness that was her hallmark when dealing with important questions: “Tell me, are these allegations true?”

Lidia looked at her, and – somewhat to her surprise – found herself smiling broadly.

“I don’t think you’d believe me if I told you”.

“No, that’s probably right”, said Tatiana, smiling herself. “You were always a very good liar. I am too, so it must be genetic. But I guess it’s not enough now to be a very good liar. You have to be a perfect one, or not at all”.

A few moments later, she added, as they reached the edge of the little lake in the dead centre of the woods:

“I hope you haven’t been lying, I must say. But if you have, I hope you can make it stick”.

## Chapter 11

### Challenges

“Mrs. Zemeniova is here to see you now”, said Irina.

Lidia looked up from her desk, then rose and crossed the room. She kissed Maria on both cheeks, then motioned to her to sit down.

“Thank you, Irina”, said Lidia. “How long have we got?”

“Forty-five minutes before the next meeting”, said Irina.

Lidia looked at her watch. “Good”, she said. “Now, Maria, what were the subjects you wanted to talk about?”

Maria switched on her tape-recorder. “Well”, she said, “As you know, there has been much speculation recently about whether you will stand for a second term as President. It would be natural for you to wish to do so, since by the time of the election you will have served less than a year and a half. On the other hand, in recent weeks you have had to face a great deal of hostile press coverage...”

Lidia held up a hand to halt her. “Maria, I must tell you that I am not in a position to discuss the *Fist* case. The case is due to come to trial in the middle of March, and I can offer no comment on it now”.

“I realise that”, said Maria. “I mention it only because it has given rise to some speculation that you may have lost the appetite for the Presidency. Although your approval ratings in the polls do not appear to have suffered, many people have thought they detected a lack of enthusiasm in you for these controversies. Is this true? Do you feel you might have had enough?”

“Not at all”, said Lidia, leaning forward with some eagerness in her seat. It was important to get the body language right. “As it happens, I have not yet taken a decision as to whether or not I shall stand for a second term. I believe this is a decision that needs to be taken with great care. If I do decide to stand, you can be sure it will be only because I believe I have something better to offer the people of the country than any other possible candidate. In the meantime, though, I am carrying out my duties as President with great enthusiasm. I have the great privilege of being able to meet, every day, people from all parts of our society who are facing the future in their own way. Some with anxiety, some with excitement, all of them with a courage and a resourcefulness that I continue to find really remarkable. I am proud to be able to represent them, both in this country and abroad”.

“Nevertheless”, continued Maria, “in your New Year address a couple of weeks ago many people noticed a tone that was – how shall I put it – elegiac? Valedictory? Almost as if you were saying goodbye?”

Lidia smiled. “Oh, that’s quite right, only you’ve put the wrong interpretation on it. It was about saying goodbye to a false vision of the past. Many people have clung to an idea that the difficulties we’re facing, in our economy and in our society at large, arise because we’ve lost some state of innocence that we used really to inhabit. That’s a false idea. We have always had strong values, but we have those still. What we have lost is the idea that we can get others always to take our decisions for us. We have to take them for ourselves now. Realising that does involve saying good-bye. But it’s a positive thing, a way of facing the future with confidence. I feel confident about the future, and I want our people to feel that confidence too. It’s a matter of honouring our attachment to the past while acknowledging that some things are now truly lost.”.

Attachment and loss. To Maria, it was surreal to hear Lidia talk about them in the same banalities so many other politicians used. It is in the nature of mourning that what is lost must somehow be appreciated in the midst of the preparation for what succeeds. It defines the predicament of a society in upheaval, in transition, just as it encapsulates the predicament of any attachment from which the bruised heart must move on. There is no better balm for such a bruise than the renewed testing of the muscle, the opening out toward other attachments, yet every movement in that direction is an aching reminder of what went before. Lidia herself, facing as she did in so many directions and navigating by so many different stars, had a surer sense than anyone Maria had ever known of the capacities and limits of the heart under such strains. She could keep her orientation to a familiar shore even as she followed uncharted currents out to sea. But it was a wholly unspoken and animal sense; the moment she began to articulate it she fell back upon phrases Maria had heard on the lips of demagogues a thousand times. It was the oddest paradox of all that Lidia, a rich and beautiful refugee from her country’s darkest time, should be called upon now to offer comfort, inspiration and an example to millions of her fellow citizens with whom she shared nothing. It was a sign of how much their collective confidence had been shaken.

“I think of the present”, continued Lidia, “as a kind of corridor between a past and a future that both seem more spacious than anything we can enjoy today. But the spaciousness of the past is imaginary, you know. It wasn’t really what some people think it to have been. What we have to hope is that the future doesn’t mislead us in the same way”.

Maria was not at all sure she knew what Lidia meant. Perhaps the only simple truth about Lidia was that the better you came to know her, the harder she was to understand. Like so much of modern life, really.

“I see”, said Maria. Her reflections as she listened to Lidia had taken her in a distracting direction, and she sought anchor in a concrete challenge. “Well, if I could take another example, when the government stepped in to prevent the closure of the Rublov

shoe factory three weeks ago, you were heavily criticised because the senior management had made a large contribution to your election campaign. When you - ”

Lidia interrupted her. “Maria, I made a statement at the time making it quite clear that I had no part in the decision to subsidise the Rublov factory. I had been sorry to hear of the closure, naturally, but decisions of this kind are a matter for the Ministry of Industry and not for the President. I’m surprised you bring this up now. I thought I had made that quite clear”.

“I understand that”, said Maria with gentle persistence. “The reason I mention it is that at the time of that controversy, you were asked a number of times how you intended to raise money for a re-election campaign without allowing people to buy special favours from the government. You said at the time that you hoped to bring forward some ideas, but to date we have heard nothing. Is that perhaps because you have decided there may be no re-election campaign?”

“No, it is not. If and when I announce a decision to stand for re-election, I shall also make an announcement about the raising of money”.

“So, can I ask you more positively what you see as the challenges ahead for the country in the four years after the next election?”

Lidia relaxed a little. After all the hostile questioning she had had to endure in the last few weeks, this was comfortable territory. She talked about the application to join the European Union, about the improvement of relations with Russia, about the reasonable hope that economic growth would resume again the following year. Then she talked about the changing position of women in the country, about the evolving nature of their relations with their families and with their workplaces. “We have a paradox in this country”, she said. “Women here have among the highest levels of education of any country in the world, particularly of technical education in subjects like mathematics and the sciences. And yet they don’t yet have the role in society that this education naturally prepares them for. In factories and offices they’re usually in subordinate positions. At home their men often feel threatened by them. So while women should be well prepared to make the most of the new opportunities, they’re also having to face a disruption in their traditional relations with men. And that’s difficult for the men, and often for the women too”.

At times Lidia felt almost as though her mother was a silent ghost in attendance at this interview, so close was the theme to Tatiana’s heart.

It was thirty minutes into the interview. Maria fiddled with her notebook, and leaned forward to turn up the volume on her tape-recorder. The she fiddled with her notebook again.

“I have one other subject I would like to raise”, she said. “Just over a year ago your Presidential Secretary, Georgy Rimov, died in a fall outside his apartment”.

Lidia looked at Maria in surprise. Then she realised some kind of response was called for.

“Yes”, she said. “It was extremely sad. He was a young man. Very full of promise”.

“Did you ever have any reason to think his death might be other than an accident?”

Lidia looked at Maria open-mouthed.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Did you ever have any reason to think his death might be other than accidental?”

“I don’t understand what you mean”.

“Well, let me ask you a different question, then. It is no secret that Rimov had many enemies. A man in his position would be bound to have enemies. Have you ever had any reason to think any of them might have had a hand in his death?”

Lidia was silent for a moment. “No”, she said at last. “No. I mean, the thought has never, no, no-one has ever suggested anything like that to me. It’s true that, in the last few years, organised criminals have increasingly resorted to violent means to, well, to settle their scores. But no, this is the first time anyone has ever even asked me the question. I have no reason whatever to think anything of the kind”.

Maria was watching her very carefully. It was evident that Lidia was surprised and shaken.

“May I ask you why you have put that question to me?”

“Certainly”, said Maria. “This morning a witness made a statement at a police station in the city. I am not at present in a position to say where. The witness claimed to have seen a scuffle outside Rimov’s apartment on the morning of his death. It appears either that Rimov was pushed to his death, or that he may have been dead before he fell”.

Lidia looked at Maria in astonishment. “Why? Why has no-one said anything about his before?”

“It may be that the witness was afraid of coming forward”.

“Afraid of whom? I mean, who could have...?”

“I don’t know”.



“That is very disturbing news”, said Lidia.

“May I ask you something else?”

“Of course”.

“Were you aware that Rimov was an acquaintance of Anatoly Chikan?”

Lidia frowned at her. “No. Why? I mean, why is that so surprising? And why does it matter? Most people know each other in this city”.

“It has been suggested that Rimov may have been party to some of the things Chikan knew about his work for the advertising agency *Fist*”.

Lidia looked away, and was silent while she calculated the implications of the question. When she turned back to Maria her face was pale, but her eyes blazed.

“That is an outrageous suggestion. Switch off your tape-recorder”.

Maria did not move.

“Switch off your tape-recorder”.

Reluctantly, Maria leaned forward. There was a click, and the tape-recorder stopped.

“What I am about to say to you is strictly off the record”, said Lidia. “If you ever reveal to anyone what I say to you now, you will never set foot in the Presidential Palace again while I am here. And I will never speak to you again, anywhere, ever”.

Lidia stood up, turned her back to Maria, and walked towards the tall window at the far end of her office. It was a late winter afternoon, and already the street lamps were beginning to come on. Below her, cars were making their way along the avenue in both directions, their occupants busy about their many different projects, none of them knowing or caring about the eyes that watched them from the Castle windows. None of them could imagine how much time the eyes in the Castle spent observing the streets, wondering at the ceaseless energy that made them crawl with life.

Lidia turned back and walked slowly towards Maria. She was evidently making a major effort at self-control. A little way in front of Maria she stopped. Then she said, in a clear, quiet voice:

“Maria, you and I have been good friends. Better than that. Very close friends, I would say. As you know, I have wanted to ensure that some of this could survive the

change in circumstances that my election brought about. Without being naïve about what was possible and what was not.

“In the last few weeks I have been, as you noted, the target of some very hostile and malicious comment indeed. I don’t want to enter into the substance of that now. I don’t expect my friends to take my word for everything. I don’t expect them to leap to my defence. I’m quite capable of defending myself. But you don’t have to be biased towards me to note that some of those attacking me have some very deep and self-interested motives. They have an interest in unsubstantiated rumour, in the kind of speculation that, because it’s never properly explained, can never be properly answered. It’s no mystery why they do it. They want me out of here, and they hope to make me quit without a fight. Just out of disgust.

“I’ve been extremely unwilling to grant open interviews in the last two weeks. They’re painful and difficult for me, precisely because they require me to listen to innuendo and speculation of the kind there is no answer to. When you requested an interview I accepted. Why? Well, quite simply because you are, or were, a friend. I don’t mean I expected you to avoid difficult questions. I didn’t expect you to take my side against anyone else. But I didn’t expect you to give credence to malicious, defamatory and unpleasant gossip. I certainly didn’t expect you to ambush me, to take a piece of extremely nasty innuendo and fling it at me at the end of a serious interview while watching to see just how much it would upset me. I’ve been trying to think through what your question can have meant, and there’s only one answer. Someone has decided that, while I appear to be on the defensive, it can be suggested I was in some way responsible for Secretary Rimov’s tragic death. That is an utterly outrageous suggestion. I was upset and distressed by Rimov’s death, and I’m upset and distressed at even the possibility that it could have been anything else but an accident. It was quite reasonable of you to tell me about the statement this witness has made. That is, presumably, an objective legal fact. It was utterly dishonest and unpleasant of you to suggest that I might have anything to do with this. That’s not a fact; that’s a malicious and ridiculous insinuation. It was unworthy of a friend”.

She stopped, and looked at Maria. Maria’s eyes met hers.

“Lidia”, said Maria. “You’ve spoken as a friend, and I’ll answer as a friend. Let me just say that we wouldn’t be having this part of the discussion if we were not friends. If anyone else had stopped the interview in the middle like that, I would have picked up my tape-recorder and left the room immediately. When I applied for an interview I did so through the normal channels. I asked the Presidential Secretary, exactly as I used to do when President Czernov was alive. I didn’t seek any special favours. I had no reason to think you would grant me any special favours, and you said nothing about having agreed to the interview purely out of friendship. I started the interview on the record. I didn’t try to soften you up by pretending it would be anything but an official interview. I talked first about uncontroversial things, because I knew my questions about Rimov would be difficult, and I wanted to give us a chance to cover this ground properly. That’s exactly what I would have done with President Czernov, and I make no apologies for treating

President Maliakova the same way. The developments in the Rimov case are extremely serious, and they need serious investigation. That's the police's job, but it's also one that needs journalists to be at their most professional. It's not my job as a professional journalist to believe or disbelieve anything I may hear about his case. It is my job to record the reactions of the people concerned in as objective a way as I can. That means recording their reactions to what people are saying as well as to what can be legally proved.

"Let me just say one last thing. Out of friendship. As your friend I want you to come through this difficult time. I want you to go on and be re-elected, and to go down in history as one of this country's truly great Presidents. As your friend I think you can do it, and as your friend I'm proud to give you my support".

"But I'm not just your friend. I told you once before that as a journalist I would treat President Maliakova no differently from the way I would have treated President Czernov. As my friend I hope you'll remember that it's as important for me to do my job properly as it is for you to do yours".

Lidia looked hard at her, but said nothing. "That's all", said Maria.

"Very well", said Lidia. "You can switch your tape-recorder back on".

Maria leaned forward. There was a click, and a tiny whirr.

"I have just one last thing to say", said Lidia. "What you have just told me about Secretary Rimov is very disturbing and distressing news. It is an utter surprise to me. I take it very seriously, and shall be assuring the police of the complete co-operation of the Presidential staff in their investigation. That is all. Goodbye".

\* \* \* \* \*

When Korov entered the office he was in a state of some agitation. He could not believe the President had been so foolhardy.

"Your Excellency", he said. She was still sitting at her desk. She motioned to him to sit down in front of her.

"I apologise for requesting this meeting additionally to our normal weekly briefings", he said.

"Fortnightly", said Lidia coolly.

"Fortnightly briefings", said Korov, nodding.

“Well?” said Lidia.

“Well. I have just heard about the undertaking you gave yesterday to the City of Vilnitz police. I mean the promise of full co-operation in the Rimov case”.

“Yes?”

“Your Excellency, is this wise?”

Lidia had been looking distractedly at the wall over his right shoulder. She now turned her eyes full upon him.

“Why ever not?”

“Well...” Korov gestured helplessly. Did she really want him to spell it out?

“There is nothing to be afraid of”, she said. “Is there?”

And she smiled at him. Korov felt a kind of shiver go down him.

“They can look as hard as they like”, she said. “They won’t find anything to worry us”.

She was astonishingly cool about it. She almost frightened him sometimes. He could see now. She had worked out that the best way to throw them off the scent was to be as apparently open as possible. She had promised them full co-operation, and was presumably even now calculating which of Rimov’s papers needed to be destroyed, so that the investigators would find nothing. Korov felt a surge of admiration for her. Even Czernov at his most cold-blooded had never been quite as cynical as she could be. Czernov in the end had been too arrogant; he had thought you could just ignore people and they would go away. He had usually been right, of course, though Korov had often been the one to make them go away for him, sometimes permanently. But she was made of a different metal. She knew you had to charm them right up until the end.

Now he had her assurance that the investigators would find nothing, that she would protect him, he felt more comfortable. He had always believed she would not disappoint him. She was a magnificent woman, really; more remarkable than he had ever imagined.

Frankly, he felt sorrier than ever that the Karlova woman had slipped through his fingers. To have done that service for the President would have cemented their mutual dependence better than anything. Now that danger threatened, Korov realised he must try to find some other service to perform for her that would do as well. He began to cast his mind around the possibilities. It was a form of reflection he particularly enjoyed.

“Very good, Your Excellency”, said Korov. He stood up. And this time he really did chance a tiny click of the heels.

\* \* \* \* \*

The announcement that Karina Burstinaia, former model and currently a newsreader on TV1, was to launch a new political organisation called the Movement for National Regeneration apparently came as a surprise to everyone in the intellectual and political elite of Vilnitz except to President Maliakova herself. To Lidia it seemed like the natural culmination of all the hostility to which she had been subjected in recent months. If it had not been Burstinaia, she reasoned, it would very soon have been somebody else. Although Burstinaia did not explicitly say that she would contest the presidential election in May, her press release talked about the need to “find candidates for the highest office who would reflect the highest character and integrity in our national life, and preserve our country from the moral abyss into which it has begun to slide”. Few people doubted that she intended to put herself forward in that very role.

Lidia, Grigor and Irina were having a quiet supper in the presidential apartments when the news arrived. Irina left the room to take a call; they heard her say: “Can you fax it through?” and then she disappeared downstairs to the office. She came back about five minutes later with that impassive stillness of countenance, contrasting with a lively laughter of the eyes, that Lidia had come to realise was a reliable portent of interesting if not always welcome news.

Karina Burstinaia was probably the country’s best known ex-model after Lidia herself. She was a little older than Lidia, in her late thirties. She too had lived abroad for a number of years. Her father had been a senior diplomat, and she had taken advantage of a period of temporary liberalisation under the communist regime to launch herself on a modelling career while he was stationed in Paris. The ensuing repression had not obliged her to abandon the enterprise, though no-one was quite sure why not, given that people had been imprisoned for much less visible compromises with capitalism. Her father had been well connected, certainly, and there were also stories of her having a political protector very high up in the regime. The suggested identity of this protector varied; hints had been dropped at one time or another about virtually every member of the cabinet in the country’s last communist government – dropped, it should be said, usually by the individuals themselves. During the last year of communism, as the government tottered, Karina had embarked upon a singing career, with a privately produced album full of cheerful songs with no political content, and indeed very little content of any kind. Four years later, with capitalism in full swing, the album would doubtless have been a runaway success, but at that critical period the country’s youth had demanded something with more bite. The album flopped, despite being played continually on state-controlled radio, although significant sales were reported to communist youth clubs, where they played to

empty halls while the young people were out demonstrating and slashing the tyres on Autovils.

Karina did not try singing again, but landed a job as a newsreader on state television, miraculously keeping the job when it was replaced by TV1 after the revolution. It was true that she read the news very well. She was also a conspicuous figure on the Vilnitz social scene. Her marriage two years after the revolution to an expatriate millionaire who had returned to Vilnitz to deal in property was one of the first events in the former communist bloc to feature in *Hello!* magazine. It was no secret that she had strong political views: their content varied but their strength did not. But most people imagined that any political ambitions she nourished would find their expression through support for her husband. He was a colourful and irascible figure who from time to time would make public statements attacking corruption, abortion, immigration, the evils of communism and the evils of capitalism, often all in the same paragraph. It was for that reason most people were to find her announcement now a considerable shock.

Irina handed the fax to Lidia, who laid it on the table between herself and Grigor so they could both read it at the same time.

Grigor finished reading first, and watched Lidia till she finished in turn.

“Who’s behind this?” asked Lidia. “Is it her own idea, do you think, or is it someone else?”

“Could be either”, said Grigor. “But whichever it is, it’s very clever”.

“Why?” asked Lidia, a little peeved. “You don’t think she’s a real threat?”

“Be realistic”, said Grigor. “You have about seventy percent popular support. That’s not because seventy percent of the population really support and identify with what you’re doing. Some of them do – I don’t know, maybe thirty, forty percent? – while the rest of them think you make a refreshing change whatever you do. Those are exactly the sort of people who might think she’s a refreshing change too. And then she’ll have some support of her own for what she actually thinks”.

“Does she actually think?” asked Lidia.

“You know what I mean. Look at it”.

Lidia looked gloomily at the press release. “New moral spirit in public life...end to corruption...deception of the people...family values...end to the scandal of abortion...return to the Church...resurgence of national pride...” Most of it was upliftingly vague, political mood music, no more. But its drift was clear.

“Well, we’ll soon see, won’t we?” said Irina brightly. “Her first rally is on Sunday evening. Looks like working on the Lord’s Day to me, but you can’t expect her to be consistent. It’ll be interesting to see how big a crowd she draws”.

## Chapter 12

### Videos

The first public meeting of Karina Burstinaia's Movement for National Regeneration was a noisy, festive rally in the hall of the Vilnitz Music Academy. There were balloons, t-shirts emblazoned with her picture, leaflets offering reduced prices at the opening the following month of the country's first Burger King ("we use only best home produced beef"). There was a stall selling copies of what was ominously described as "Karina's debut album", plus devotional cassettes of various kinds, cassettes of speeches by Karina's husband, and videos of Karina's television successes. A well-drilled team of young men in crimson t-shirts and tight black trousers shepherded the crowd between lines of trestle tables to the seats near the front. As the hall began to fill up the hubbub almost drowned the plaintive traditional folk melodies being played in one corner by a quartet of musicians whose more usual venue was a boat on the river during the tourist season.

When Karina arrived at the podium, flanked by her husband and two strapping security men who looked like walking advertisements for Burger King, there was an outbreak of cheering, clapping and whistling. She smiled and smiled, enjoying the applause, and then, just as it appeared to have peaked, her husband stood forward and held up his hand for silence.

"Tonight", he said, in a booming voice that carried thunderously to the back of the hall, "tonight I am privileged to present to you someone who represents what our ordinary citizens aspire to do for their country. Someone whose face is familiar to you all. Someone whose heart is dear to you all. Someone who has decided, after searching deeply in her conscience, to dedicate herself to the task of saving this great nation from the dangers that threaten it. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Karina!"

More whistling and stamping. It was all a bit more than Gabriel could take. The archbishop had asked his secretary to attend the rally discreetly and report back. Gabriel was hard put to know how exactly to interpret his mission: in a rally as brash and loud as this one the very idea of discretion seemed out of place. Besides, his short sight meant it was pointless sitting further back than the third row, so anyone else in the audience with a minimal knowledge of who was who in Vilnitz could have deduced – had they been in the least interested – that the archbishop was vicariously weighing up his political options. Gabriel kept his face lowered to avoid catching anyone's eye, and devoted his attentions to drawing caricatures of the people on the platform. These at least would keep the archbishop happy even if the rest of his report did not.

In the end Gabriel's account of the meeting was more positive than he had been expecting as he sat through the first raucous minutes of Karina's appearance. It was true that her speech lacked substance, but Gabriel's disdain for all politicians was so deep and so universal that he thought it uninteresting to speculate whether her rhetoric was any



more vapid than any other he had heard. Much more important was the fact that she made the right obeisances, paid her respects in the right direction. And just occasionally she hit upon a felicitous piece of eloquence, creating that unexpected delight that comes about whenever a couple of lost phrases stumble upon one another in fog. She had talked about values, about the family, about history, about loyalty, about nationhood. She attacked the right enemies: she spoke of the corruption of foreign ways; the rise of criminal gangs run by foreign immigrants. She attacked the light-headedness of the President, who had flounced into the Vatican instead of representing her country in a tone of dutiful respect. She pointed out that a President who had difficulties recognising her own legs on a poster could hardly be expected to recognise the real problems facing the country (that raised a roar in the hall). She said an unmarried President would have very little reason to care about families, and hinted that an unmarried President must be prey to all kinds of unstable temptations besides. Most important of all, she had pointed to the right symbols of hope, the right sources of strength in facing the difficulties ahead. In particular, she made a fulsome tribute to the role of the Church in stiffening the resistance of the country's youth to the seductions of Western materialism.

Well, perhaps "stiffening" could have been better chosen, thought Gabriel as he reflected on the particularly charming way in which she had pronounced these words. It was becoming hot in the hall, and he ran his finger under his collar, which was beginning to feel tight around his neck. Yes, stiffening was not really...no, the trouble was that Gabriel was if anything too close to the stage. In the interests of getting his subject in focus he was in danger of observing her every gyration, every tremble of her well proportioned figure as she shook with the enthusiasm of her own rhetoric. And when she shook, a little underground rumble seemed to connect her movements along a line that went straight to the seat of Gabriel's chair. Gabriel tried hard to think hard about the speech and not hard about the speaker, but it was too hard. Indeed, hardness was everything. He was feeling very hot indeed, and a bead of perspiration ran down his forehead and lodged itself in his left eyebrow.

Gabriel gasped and tried to sit up straight in his chair to shake himself out of his reverie. Best not to look; best to concentrate on what she was saying. But closing his eyes didn't help: her buxom image seemed to have lodged itself immediately behind them, where it continued to move sinuously in time to the rise and fall of her voice. By the time the speech finished and the roar and the applause had carried the rest of the audience to its feet, Gabriel could hardly remember what the last five minutes of her address had said. He was also feeling decidedly faint, and only the overwhelming momentum of the standing ovation made him rise to his own feet, with an energy that came he knew not from where.

Gabriel needed a good half hour walking around the old town in the cool evening air before he felt sufficiently composed to return and make his report to the archbishop. "I think it definitely has possibilities", he said, trying to phrase everything as abstractly as possible in contrast to the disturbing concreteness he had actually experienced. "Of course, it's not exactly a restrained campaigning style, but restraint at the moment may not be what the country needs. And I'm not sure how she reconciles the message about

foreign consumerism with her enthusiasm for Burger King, but I suppose she has to appeal to the youth vote somehow. Overall she's someone we can probably work with".

"Well, we must work out a proper strategy", said the archbishop. He was still smarting from the memory of being comprehensively ignored by the media during the last presidential election, and was determined to ensure Gabriel organised things better this time around. It didn't help that Rudi had recently told him, with a triumphant cackle, that he was a figure from the past and had better give up all hope of being taken seriously in political life. Coming from Rudi that was pretty rich. No doubt politics was a different game these days. There was very little automatic deference for authority, for a start. The archbishop recognised that there was something to be said for the new assertiveness among the country's citizens; he had seen too much evidence of the way their old deference had been abused. But authority could still enjoy an influence; it just had to work a little harder to earn the citizens' respect. The archbishop was certainly not averse to hard work.

"It's probably best to start off with a number of speeches to a more general audience before you do anything that might identify you too closely with her movement", said Gabriel. "I don't know: what about the Chamber of Commerce, or the League of Concerned Mothers?"

The archbishop winced. Gabriel must be losing his touch, to mention those two organisations in the same breath. They normally required entirely different approaches, one a philosophical disquisition about the need not to take metaphors about camels and eyes of needles in too narrowly restrictive a sense, the other a more homely, pastoral approach, with Mary and Martha as the theme. Neither seemed quite the right place to launch a campaign to restore a sense of values to the heart of the country's life. He frowned, and Gabriel took the hint.

"Actually, I've had another idea. What about this new discussion society, the Vilnitz Philosophical Forum?"

"Yes", said the archbishop, cautiously. "Who's behind it?"

"I'm not sure who all the individuals are", said Gabriel. "I had the impression it was a mixture of businessmen interested in intellectual matters and intellectuals interested in making money. But the name sounds right anyway. I'm sure a press release of any talk you gave there would be very respectfully received. Perhaps we could arrange for the talk to be reprinted in the *Voice*".

The archbishop reflected a moment, and then said: "Yes, I like that idea. Would you be so kind as to make enquiries and let me know?"

Once his secretary had left the archbishop settled down to plan a preliminary outline of what he might say. A substantial speech, dealing in great themes. About the times calling out for men great enough to respond to them in a voice sufficient to the

challenge. About the rent that had been made in the fabric of familiar things, and the fear that made too many of us unwilling to recognise the inadequacy of our habitual responses. About the need not to jettison the ancient and the true. About the need to sweep away the hidebound and the banal. About the need to hold on to...about...

The archbishop was sleepy, and found himself ruffling distractedly among the papers on his desk. A speech as important as this one could hardly be composed in an hour or two. Gabriel had thoughtfully left behind for his scrutiny his sketches of the meeting, and the archbishop looked over them appreciatively. Infuriating though Gabriel might sometimes be, he really was enormously talented. That one of the line-up on the platform, with those two beefy security men whose large chests were nevertheless dwarfed by the speaker's own voluminous bust, was worthy of publication in the *Voice* itself. Though perhaps not over Gabriel's signature, not with a bust quite that large. No, definitely not over Gabriel's signature. And as for the sketch underneath, that really wasn't fit for publication anywhere. Oh dear, Gabriel! A little restraint, please!

The archbishop yawned contentedly. He stood up, switched out the light on his desk, and made for the door of his study

\* \* \* \* \*

Unlike the adults around her, the eight-year old girl appeared not in the least overawed to be talking to the President.

"This is the play we've been writing", she said, pointing to her notebook, which contained page after page of a large, sloping scrawl. "And this is where I do my sums".

"Do you like sums?" asked Lidia.

"I find them difficult", said the little girl, whose name was Rina. "And sometimes I like difficult things. But often I don't".

"My mother teaches people how to do sums", said Lidia.

"My mother doesn't", said the girl, in a matter-of-fact way.

"What does your mother do, Rina?" asked Lidia.

"She works in a factory. She makes machines".

"What kind of machines?"

"I don't know, really. I think they're big and noisy. She can't hear very well now, because of the machines".

“What time does she go to work?”

“She goes at night-time. Well, she used to go at night, but she doesn’t go much any more”.

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think there’s much work”.

“What do you want to do when you’re older, Rina?”

“I certainly don’t want to work in a factory!” said the girl emphatically. “Yuk!”

“Why’s it so bad?”

“Well, I don’t know about other factories, but my mother has headaches all the time. She says it’s because of work. And my father’s always coughing, coughing all the time. He says it’s because of work too. So I think work makes you sick. I don’t want to work”.

“Do you think all work’s like that?” asked Lidia.

“No!” said Rina. “There’s a man who comes round to see us. He always has very clean shoes. I’ve noticed that. He just talks to my father, and my father gives him some money. He has a very nice car, too. That seems like a good way to work”.

“Well, Rina”, said Lidia, “I hope that when you’re older you’ll be able to do some good work, that doesn’t make you sick and that also helps other people. You’ll have to keep working at your sums, though. Will you please tell your mother and father that I’d like to invite them to come and see me. Mr. Antonov here will arrange it. I want you to come too, and I want you to bring me a new book of your sums. I want to see how well you can do them”.

Before she left the school, Lidia exchanged a few words with the class teacher over tea and cakes, in a classroom that smelled of cabbage and damp wood. “Almost all the children here have parents who are on short-time working or who have been laid off”, said the woman, who was in her thirties, short and stockily built. She looked very tired. “It’s strange for many of them. They’ve had to go from hardly seeing their parents at all to seeing them at home and unhappy all the time. It’s a very unsettling experience for these kids”.

“I expect that puts a lot of strain on the staff here”.

“We do our best, but yes, it does. And you know, we haven’t been able to buy any new books for three years. It’s difficult to make the children think positively about their

future when people talk all the time on the television about change, but nothing ever changes in their school”.

“Thank you for reminding me of that”, said Lidia. “And thank you for taking your time to show me around. You’re doing a very important job”.

As the presidential party left the school gates, its way was blocked by a small group of reporters. Several microphones were thrust towards Lidia, while the secret servicemen held at bay the reporters themselves.

“Your Excellency, have you any comment on the new evidence in the Rimov case?”

“I have no comment”, said Lidia.

“But Your Excellency, the evidence about tyre marks surely indicates...”

“I’m sorry”, said Lidia. “I can’t talk about the case at the moment. If I have any comment to make I shall issue a statement”.

In the car she called Irina on her mobile phone. “What’s this new evidence?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m sorry, I thought of calling you about it, but I didn’t realise the reporters would get to you first. It seems another witness has come forward. He remembers hearing a car driving away very fast, just before Rimov’s body was found. He went to the place afterwards and saw a distinctive set of tyre marks. Of course, the marks aren’t there any more, but the witness is a mechanic and claims they were foreign tyres. He may even be able to identify the make. The police won’t say any more than that, but it looks as though they may be on to something”.

“Okay, thanks. Let’s talk about it when I get back”.

Lidia did not know whether to be pleased or troubled by this news. Her car sped along the rutted streets in the city’s outer suburbs, from time to time slowing as it passed a small knot of people clustered around a pavement stall. Here and there patches of unmelted snow had survived like chameleons by turning grey-brown. There were buds on the fruit trees, but a low, forbidding sky.

When she reached the office Irina was waiting with a fax in her hand. “Burstinaia has put out a statement”, she said. “She’s calling for the appointment of a special independent prosecutor for the Rimov case. She says it’s too important to leave to the ordinary processes of the law. The objectivity of the investigation must be beyond reproach”.

Lidia stared for a moment at Irina. “She’s a fool”, she said at last. “That’s exactly the way to make sure the police never co-operate with her again. She’s only doing it to make trouble”.

“Unfortunately”, she added, half to herself, “she’s a dangerous fool”.

Lidia sat down and read the fax carefully twice.

“Tell me something, Irina”, said Lidia. “Maybe this evidence is okay. Maybe it isn’t. But doesn’t it strike you as odd that all these people suddenly remember things they never thought of at the time? And they happen to remember them when there’s a presidential election coming up?”

“Well, what can I say?” said Irina. “Of course it’s odd. But we haven’t got much choice. We’re going to co-operate with the investigation. At least Burstinaia’s statement shows she hasn’t managed to buy the police yet, otherwise she’d hardly be so keen to appoint a special prosecutor”.

“Yes, at least there’s that”, said Lidia. “Although of course, she knows it’s a crazy idea, and it’ll never happen. So maybe it’s just a bluff. Maybe that’s just what she intends us to think. Maybe the police are all in her pocket too”.

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Lidia was at an official dinner in the City Hall. As she left, one of the security men handed her an envelope. Inside was a hand-written message from Irina. “Grigor Moratis has asked to see you urgently. I said he could come to your office at 10.30. Hope you don’t mind”.

It was 10.20 by the time Lidia arrived back in the castle. Grigor was already waiting for her at the reception desk to the Presidential Palace, carrying a plastic bag in which something was wrapped. She was a little irritated; she would have preferred to have a few minutes to gather her thoughts. But Grigor was looking extremely pleased with himself, and it was hard to begrudge his presence when his enthusiasm at her arrival seemed so boyishly unforced.

Lidia dismissed the security men, and walked up the stairs with Grigor to the first floor. Half way along the corridor to her office Grigor suddenly stopped.

“Lidia”, he said.

“Yes?”

“Can we go to your apartment? Not the office?”

“If you like. Why?”

“You’ll see why in a moment”.

Just before they reached the apartment Grigor said in a quiet voice:

“If your housekeeper’s still on duty, I think you should send her home”.

Lidia turned a quizzical eye on him.

“I should warn you, Grigor, if this is your idea of a good time to try a seduction, you’ve miscalculated”.

“Nothing like that, I promise. But I think you’d still prefer your housekeeper not to be there. Just wait and see”.

When the housekeeper had left Lidia looked at Grigor enquiringly.

“The study, I think”, he said.

While Lidia was opening the drinks cabinet in her study Grigor made for a second large cabinet in the corner. Inside were a television and video recorder. He turned on the television, and reached inside the carrier bag.

“I don’t believe it”, said Lidia. “You persuade me in here under the pretence of some urgent appointment, and I discover all you want to do is watch a movie! Watch it in your own fucking apartment. I’m exhausted”.

Grigor turned round to her in the act of inserting the cassette. “This is not just any movie, Lidia. Believe me”. Then he saw she had been teasing him, and relaxed.

He was grinning to himself unrestrainedly. Intrigued, Lidia sat down in a large armchair opposite the screen with a glass of vodka in her hand.

The screen flickered. It was a very poor quality cassette, and it took a while for Lidia’s eyes to adjust to the lighting and to make out what was happening. The credits rolled over a shot of a woman walking down the street and into a building. Inside there was what appeared to be a doctor’s surgery, with a tall blond man in a white coat and a nurse with her back to the camera. The woman who had entered sat down in front of the doctor’s desk and flashed an improbably broad smile at him.

“This looks terrible, Grigor. Do you mind telling me what it’s all about?”

“Wait”.

After the briefest exchange of monosyllables the woman approached the desk. Once again Lidia had to squint hard at the screen to make out what was happening in the flickering light. The woman began to remove her clothes, while the doctor ripped off his white coat and began to paw at her chest.

Within a few seconds the shot had changed to one of the woman on her knees, performing fellatio on the doctor. Beside her the nurse was removing her uniform, and when she had done so she also knelt in front of the doctor.

“Christ, Grigor, what the hell makes you think I want to watch this kind of garbage? I can get perfectly good quality porn all by myself. I told you, I’m exhausted!”

Grigor raised his hand. “I said ‘wait’. You won’t have to put up with this for long”.

A few moments later he pressed the “pause” button. The camera had zoomed in on the face of the nurse, which was in half-profile. The image trembled on the screen.

Grigor turned to look at Lidia. As he had expected, her jaw had dropped.

There was a moment’s silence. “Grigor”, said Lidia, “This isn’t really her”.

“Our friend Karina? I’m afraid it is. A bit younger, of course. But it’s her, all right. She wasn’t quite as pure in those days as she’d like to make out nowadays”.

“How can you be sure it’s her?”

“Well, I won’t oblige you to watch the whole thing, but you see enough of her to be pretty sure. I’d heard a rumour she’d done a bit of this kind of thing, when she was younger, but no-one I knew had any idea whether any copies still existed. However, one of my informants knew she had a large mole at the top of her right thigh. And there’s a shot later on where you can see it very clearly. So I don’t think there’s any serious doubt”.

“Okay. So question number two. Why did she do this? She didn’t need money. Her father was rich”.

“Not quite true. Her father was powerful. He was ambassador in Paris, Bonn, Washington. But he wasn’t one of those who used his power to get involved in rackets. Not big ones, anyway. But his daughter had quite an expensive lifestyle. So I think she did need money. But that’s probably not why she did it”.

“This isn’t good enough quality to make money”, said Lidia. “Most porn shot in the US is as good as anything on the big screen, and has been for years. Technically, I mean. Creatively it’s crap”.



“Well”, said Grigor, “this cassette is probably nearly twenty years old. I’d say Karina is no more than eighteen or twenty in these shots. So it’s probably deteriorated a lot. We can’t tell how good it was when it was made”.

“Perhaps”, said Lidia reflectively, “I’m no expert, but it doesn’t look high budget to me. Maybe it was a lot of money for an eighteen year old. But she would have had a lot to lose. Her father was ambassador, and in those days people were shot for less”.

“I think that’s right”, said Grigor. “But there’s another possibility. The rumours I heard didn’t mention money. What they said was that someone high up, in the Cabinet, had a private ring. He had these movies made for his own personal consumption. And the people who took part were not necessarily paid. Most of them were, um, persuaded”.

“What could have persuaded her?”

“Lidia, I don’t know. I know a lot of dirt about a lot of people. But this was a long time ago, and I don’t know everything about everyone. You know, you couldn’t be the beautiful daughter of a powerful man without giving someone a way to pressurise you. Either your father gets in the shit, and you’re called in to dig him out. Or you sleep with the wrong guy, and someone tells you his wife has a hotline to the secret police and you wouldn’t want her to find out, would you? I don’t know. Don’t you think it’s kind of pedantic to ask?”

“I am a pedant”, said Lidia.

“Yes, but Lidia, why do we care? We have the tape now”.

“Yes”, she said thoughtfully. “What are you proposing to do with it?”

“Well, I thought I should leave that up to you. But without wishing to boast, I think I may just have assured your re-election. Handle it how you like”.

Lidia reached forward for the remote control, and released the “pause” button on the video. The scene continued, and she watched for a few seconds as the doctor lay back on his desk, and Karina climbed up to straddle him. Then Lidia switched off the tape.

“She was quite sexy in those days”, said Lidia. “I’d have liked to fuck her myself. Shame she fell in with such a tasteless crowd”.

“You mean her crowd then, or her crowd now?”

“Both, I guess”.

There was silence.

“Well?” asked Grigor, after a moment. He was a little perplexed at Lidia’s calm reaction to what, he felt, must count as the best favour anyone had ever done her. “What are *you* going to do?”

“I don’t know”, said Lidia. “I feel a bit sorry for her, really. It’s the kind of misjudgement I could easily have made myself, if things had happened a bit differently”.

Grigor frowned. “Listen, Lidia. This isn’t the time to indulge in feeling sorry for her. You can be quite sure she’s never allowed such scruples to influence her feelings towards you”.

“Yes, of course”, said Lidia. “Look, I need time to think about this. Can you leave the tape with me for a few days?”

“Okay”.

“Thank you, anyway. I’ll talk to you in a day or two. As soon as I’ve got things clearer in my head”.

This seemed a hollow promise even as it was uttered. As she saw Grigor out, Lidia reflected that things were becoming less clear with every day that passed. She was unlikely to sleep well that night. On top of the revelations about Karina, she had found an envelope on her desk. It was from Korov, announcing that he would be coming to her office about an urgent matter at eight o’clock the following morning.

## Chapter 13

### Discoveries

It was two minutes past eight when Lidia pushed open the large wooden door and began to walk down the long corridor that led to her office on the first floor of the Palace. She hoped Korov would be waiting for her already; there was something unsettling about the thought of his arriving after her, perhaps even walking quietly behind her at this very moment. Her own footfalls echoed along the corridor, but he himself was so quiet that his step might lose itself in the sound of her breath and the gentle creak and chatter of a large building stirring itself for the coming day.

She had woken early; in fact, the night had been so disturbed she was not sure she had ever been fully asleep. Her first look in the mirror had been frightening: a puffed, yeasty face she wished she had failed to recognise. “Lidia, you’re all washed up”, she had said to herself aloud. More than ever her make-up routine had felt like the preparations by which a medieval knight put on his armour for the day’s tournament. Whose feather would she wear today? In her inability to answer the question she felt suddenly very alone.

There were days when this walk down the corridor seemed like an opening out into multiple possibilities. Today was not one of them. She reached the door of her office, then paused, her fingertips on the handle. Then she went on to the next door and turned the handle. The door yielded to her pressure, so she had a fraction of a second to absorb the fact that either Irina or Korov must be inside.

Korov was standing a few feet from the door, beside one of the armchairs. Lidia wondered whether he had remained standing since his arrival, or had risen to his feet when he heard her footsteps. It was curious to find herself reflecting on such trivial questions at times like this. Perhaps it was a way of keeping larger questions at bay.

Korov kissed her hand. “Good morning, Your Excellency”.

“Good morning”.

“I apologise for requesting this meeting. May I suggest that we have our discussion in the garden?”

Lidia looked carefully at him. This was disturbing.

“If you wish”.

She went to the cupboard next to Irina’s desk and took out the raincoat that was hanging inside. While she did so Korov collected his own coat from the stand by the door.

The formal garden of the Presidential Palace was quite small by comparison with the main Castle gardens to the South. It consisted mostly of a series of low hedges in the French style, but there was a section at the end which, at President Czernov's insistence, had been turned into an imitation English bower, complete with climbing roses.

They began a slow walk around the garden in a clockwise direction.

"Your Excellency", said Korov. "What I have to discuss with you concerns the police investigation into the death of Secretary Rimov".

"Yes?"

"Your Excellency, I had for some time been wondering whether the evidence gathered by the investigation was genuine. It had seemed to me that it was too much of a coincidence that witnesses should recover either their memory or their courage just as we are approaching a presidential election".

"I have certainly wondered the same thing", said Lidia. "I'm glad we see eye to eye on that".

"There are obviously many people with a great deal to gain by stirring up trouble for us", said Korov.

"Us?" said Lidia.

"Yes, indeed", said Korov, who had not really registered her surprise. "But until yesterday I had no proof that they had actually gone so far as to fabricate evidence".

"Really?" said Lidia. "And now you have?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. Unfortunately, I do not know exactly who is behind this conspiracy. But I know the evidence is an invention".

"Can you tell me why?"

"Certainly. You will recall that the first witness claimed to have heard a scuffle. Now that may or may not be an invention, but it is certainly possible. And it cannot be disproved. But the most recent witness is undoubtedly lying".

"Why?"

"The witness claimed to have seen tyre marks from a foreign car. The police have not yet released details, but I am sure we shall find that these are asserted to be the marks of Pirelli tyres. Now, I myself drive a foreign car. A BMW, to be precise. It has Pirelli

tyres. It would not be very difficult for whoever is behind this conspiracy to have found this out. This piece of fabricated evidence is very clearly aimed at incriminating me”.

Lidia’s brain was working very fast. Something was warning her not to express aloud her surprise at what Korov was saying. It sounded like an entirely paranoid fantasy on his part. Why should anyone think him a plausible person to incriminate?

Carefully, she framed a question. “I can see your concern”, she said. “But what makes you so certain that the evidence is fabricated? Why can you be sure Pirelli tyre marks were not found outside Rimov’s apartment?”

“Well, Your Excellency, that morning there were a number of cars parked outside Rimov’s apartment. All of them were Autovils, including Rimov’s own. There were no foreign cars”.

Korov’s familiarity with the details of Rimov’s car park was certainly remarkable. A disturbing question was beginning to form itself like a knot at the back of Lidia’s mind. She realised that she must keep her confusion strictly to herself. Best to look as though she were indulging in pedantry for its own sake.

“And you’re sure they couldn’t have found any evidence of a foreign car belonging to Rimov’s killer?”

What a quaint way she had of putting things, thought Korov.

“No, Your Excellency. I am not an amateur. When I went to Rimov’s apartment that morning I went on foot”.

“When you went to Rimov’s apartment that morning you went on foot?”

“Yes, Your Excellency”.

Her hearing had not deceived her, then.

“So you left no foreign tyre marks?”

“No, Your Excellency”.

“And how long were you at Rimov’s apartment?”

“About twenty minutes”.

“What exactly did you do?”

“Most of that time I spent waiting for him to come out. When he did I was able to...to dispose of him quickly. I am highly skilled in such matters, though I say so

myself. I left no marks. When he...fell down the fire escape, he was no longer conscious”.

Lidia was silent a moment. “Thank you”, she said at last. “This has been very helpful. I want to keep in touch with you closely about these developments. We must meet again during the next few days. I shall be in touch”.

“Very good, Your Excellency. However, there is one other thing I wished to discuss with you”.

“Yes?”

“Your Excellency, Mrs Burstinaia represents at present the most serious threat to Your Excellency’s prospects of re-election. I have reason to believe that the accusations concerning Your Excellency’s role in the SHEEK advertising campaign have been supported and financed by the Burstinaia campaign”.

“I am aware of that”, said Lidia.

“You will hardly need reminding that the case is due to come to court in less than three weeks’ time. Whichever way the case is decided, the publicity cannot but be damaging”.

“Yes?”

“Your Excellency, I have a proposal. I have recently been engaged in extensive surveillance of the various properties owned by Mrs. Burstinaia and her husband. Several of them contain heating appliances of an old-fashioned and extremely unreliable kind. I believe it would be very easy to arrange an accident”.

“An accident?”

“Yes, Your Excellency”. They had reached the English bower, with its enchanting rose bushes. Lidia was torn between a wish to linger in this delightful spot, and a creepy sense that there was nowhere, however delightful, that she wished to linger with Korov. She kept moving, and Korov followed her dutifully.

“I have some experience in accidents caused by faulty heating appliances”, continued Korov. “Foul play is impossible to detect. I am certain that, with Mrs. Burstinaia removed from the scene, the case against Your Excellency in the Vilnitz High Court would collapse. Even were it not to do so, the absence of any credible challenger would ensure that the result of the next election would be a foregone conclusion”.

Lidia was silent for a moment. She was aware that in the next few minutes she would be taking some of the most important decisions of her life.

“Mr. Korov”, she said at last. “Take no action against Mrs. Burstinaia. Do you understand me? Do nothing to harm her in any way”

Korov looked puzzled. “May I know the reason?” he asked eventually.

Lidia considered carefully. With someone like Korov, you could never just give the obvious answer.

She gambled on his trust in authority. Something about the touching way he had confided in her seemed to make it a worthwhile risk. At least for a day or two.

“For the time being, it is simply that I do not wish you to do so”, she said. “I have other plans. We shall discuss it again in a few days”.

Korov was torn between his natural deference and a very evident frustration. “Your Excellency”, he said at last. “May I say something?”

“Yes”.

“Your Excellency, I would not wish you to think that the recent unfortunate publicity concerning the Rimov case has any bearing on the proposition I have just made to you. As I have said, there is no doubt whatsoever that the so-called evidence in the Rimov case is a fabrication. I can assure you that in carrying out Your Excellency’s instructions with respect to Secretary Rimov I left absolutely no incriminating evidence. I am a professional and I know what I am doing. I have been carrying out such assignments for many years, and I have never once in any way compromised the Presidents whom I have served. I would not have proposed the elimination of Mrs. Burstinaia unless I were absolutely sure that I could do so in complete safety. As you are doubtless aware, I have a network of entirely trusted collaborators, many of them working in positions of the highest importance – indeed, a significant number here in the Palace itself. None of them knows enough to pose any danger to Your Excellency, but all of them are aware that their own interests coincide fully with my own, and more importantly with those of Your Excellency. There is absolutely no danger in the proposal I have made to you. Please do not dismiss it. I would not have made the proposal had I not thought through the implications in every detail”.

It would be hard to do justice to the richness of the thoughts chasing each other through Lidia’s brain as she listened to Korov. About six years previously she had spent an hour in a parking lot in Brooklyn talking to a man who had described to her in graphic detail precisely how he intended to rape her and what he intended subsequently to do with her body. Like so many of the men she knew, he had turned out to be all talk and no action, but until his weakness became clear she had had to endure the stress of listening to him. It was, she now realised, a stress significantly lightened by the precision with which he declared his hostility to her. There was something about Korov’s bland assumption of complicity that unsettled her even more.

“Mr. Korov”, said Lidia when he had finished. “Believe me, I too know what I am doing. I must ask you absolutely to take no action whatever against Mrs. Burstinaia. We shall discuss this again in a very few days. Now I must get back to my office. Please wait for my call”.

When subsequently Lidia tried to remember how she had spent the rest of the day after Korov’s revelation she was entirely unable to do so. It was like some of those marathon sessions she remembered in Milan, when she would collapse into bed at midnight incapable of remembering the details of how she had passed her time, so entirely mechanical had the activity been.

Not least of the reasons for her blotting out the memory was Korov’s casual remark that his collaborators included some in the most trusted positions in the Presidential Palace. Perhaps he had been boasting, but the sense that she was walking among ghosts never quite left Lidia that day.

It was after eleven o’clock that evening before Lidia found herself alone again. Strangely, as soon as she did so she felt a complete absence of doubt, not so much a positive conviction as an empty sense of having exhausted all the alternatives. She dared not go yet to the police, who were in all probability in Karina’s pocket. There was no reason to doubt Korov’s statement that he had left no tyre marks, and that showed someone was fabricating evidence, even if they were doing so against a genuine culprit. Even Irina’s loyalty to her seemed suddenly less secure; after all, Korov had been the one to grant her a security clearance, and who knew what favours she might owe him for this privilege? Grigor was probably trustworthy, but probably useless; she needed someone who could act inconspicuously, and she dared not extend her confidence beyond those who could be of immediate help. There remained one person who would certainly not be useless. But it was a great risk. Korov had spoken of “the Presidents whom I have served”. His calm acceptance of assassination as one of his long-standing and routine duties suggested others might accept it with similar equanimity.

In short, nobody who was cunning enough to be able to help her was transparent enough to be trusted. Lidia had been out of the country too long.

She picked up her mobile phone. She had hesitated between that and the private phone in the office. The mobile could be tapped, certainly, but perhaps less reliably so.

She paused for a moment before pressing out the digits. This was probably the most dangerous decision of the entire day. But delaying would not make it any less so. She had a heavy sense that the number she dialled would produce no reply. The physical world was no ally of hers.

To her surprise the call was answered after three rings. “Hello?” said the voice.

“Vladimir?” she asked.



“Yes”. A pause. “Who is that?”

“This is Lidia”.

A longer pause. “President Lidia?”

“Yes. Are you alone?”

“Yes”.

“I want you to come and see me. Now. It’s important. I need your help”.

## Chapter 14

### Drawings

It was a fresh mid-morning in March. Gabriel was humming quietly to himself as he sat typing the last few sentences of the archbishop's speech in front of the computer screen. Outside the window to his right, a mischievous breeze was dislodging the hats of one tourist after another in Cathedral Square, dying down between each sally to lull the next victim into inattention, thereby creating a series of temporary illusions of a gentle spring day. The trees were in blossom, and a couple of mallards were asserting vigorously that, even among poultry, the privileges of the season should not be confined to heterosexuals alone.

Gabriel felt rather pleased at the way he had transformed the archbishop's scrawl into an impressive and coherent speech. The archbishop was normally a fine orator, but he spoke without notes, and he could be decidedly wooden when the need for a written version obliged him to compose directly onto paper. Gabriel himself felt much more at home in writing than in speech. Indeed, the avoidance of regular public speaking was chief among the privileges of belonging to the Church's administrative rather than its pastoral stream, though minimising his pastoral responsibilities came a close second. Looking after even one of life's lost innocents was hard work enough for Gabriel, especially if that one happened to be an archbishop.

Gabriel printed out the text and went next door to show it to the archbishop. It had been very good news that the Vilnitz Philosophical Forum should have reacted so enthusiastically to Gabriel's enquiry, even inviting the archbishop for a slot a few days later that had become free owing to a cancellation. It was to be, they had said, a "high-level" meeting, though it was not clear exactly what that meant since Gabriel presumed no meeting ever described itself as "low level". At any rate, they had said no press were to be officially invited since that might inhibit the "free and frank" interchange of views between the participants. But the *Voice* would print the speech the following day, and several journalists had been invited to the meeting in their personal capacity, so as to give them the privileged sense of rubbing shoulders with the influential, the intellectual and above all, the rich.

"Thank you, Gabriel", said the archbishop, and waved to his secretary to sit down. He began to read through the text, then broke off to ask chirpily: "Did you see the match last night?"

"No", said Gabriel frostily. The archbishop should know that he detested football. Furthermore, he found the local euphoria an embarrassment. It might well be that for the Vilnitz Vipers to lose to Dynamo Kiev by a mere four goals to one counted as a triumph of a kind, since the Ukrainian side had never before scored less than seven goals on its understandably infrequent visits to the city. But Gabriel felt there were certain triumphs that were best savoured quietly, and this was one of them.

“Magnificently brave display by our lads”, said the archbishop. Gabriel was about to remind him that it was probably our lads, or at least their supporters and imitators, who had vomited over the archepiscopal Lada in the small hours of that morning, obliging Gabriel to spend twenty minutes with a bucket and mop before beginning work on the speech. But then the telephone rang.

As usual it was Gabriel who reached for the receiver. But then he nodded and passed it to the archbishop. “It’s Mrs.Burstinaia’s office”, he said.

Within a few seconds Mrs. Burstinaia herself had come on the line. “Good morning, Mrs. Burstinaia”, said the archbishop in a voice that trumpeted hearty good cheer. “And the same to you...yes,indeed...yes...yes...really?...yes...yes...yes...well, actually...well, in fact, I was saying...no...no, of course...no, I quite see that...no, but...yes...yes...yes...”

Several minutes later the archbishop had still not managed to utter words with enough syllables to enable Gabriel to attempt even the most tentative guess as to what Karina was talking about. More irritatingly still, instead of displaying any resistance to the Burstinaia barrage, the archbishop was listening with an inane grin that suggested Karina was working some of her famously heavy charm. The conversation seemed set to go on indefinitely. Gabriel began to sketch to relieve the boredom, and Mrs. Burstinaia provided a ready inspiration, as did the archbishop’s fatuous smile.

Ten minutes after that he was beginning to worry seriously about the time. He put down his sketch and took the presumptuous step of tapping at his watch. The archbishop gave a little start, then said, “Excuse me, Mrs. Burstinaia, I have just been reminded that I have an engagement I must attend. I wonder whether we might meet to pursue these issues. I think it’s clear there’s a good deal of common ground...”

Another long silence, punctuated only by the occasional “yes”, “no” and “I see”. Just as Gabriel was wondering whether he would be obliged to seize the telephone from the archbishop’s hands by force, he heard the word “good-bye” and then the archbishop had replaced the receiver.

The speech was read and approved at high speed by the archbishop, and then Gabriel gathered up his papers and rushed off to the photocopier to make the requisite fifty copies. While the machine was heaving away Gabriel collected coats and car keys and shepherded the archbishop towards the door. Then he ran back to the office, seized the pile of copies of the speech, and followed the archbishop down the stairs, first closing the great wooden door with his ancient iron key.

They drove into the car park of the Marriott Hotel, then walked into the lobby, the archbishop striding magisterially ahead while Gabriel followed with his pile of copies. A small reception committee was waiting. Handshakes were exchanged, Gabriel handed over the speech and then issued his final instructions to the archbishop.

“After the speech you will take a taxi home. They will order it for you from here. I shall be waiting for you at home. At 3.30 you are due to see the Mother Superior of St. Anne’s of Turnow. At 4.30 there is the Archdiocesan Finance Committee. Good luck”.

By the time Gabriel had reached Cathedral Square again his annoyance at the archbishop had moderated, as it usually did, into a kind of indulgent amazement that anyone as impractical and disorganised should ever have attained high office in a serious institution. The man had no sense of time, for one thing. For another, he was ludicrously easy to manipulate. Burstinaia had virtually made him curl up and purr. Gabriel thought there was some sense in the Church’s giving discreet backing to her campaign, but the whole matter had to be conducted with a certain *savoir-faire*, and without giving Karina the impression that their support could be taken for granted.

He made himself a light lunch and sat down to a long list of telephone calls, mostly relating to the archbishop’s engagements for the following week. But it was hard to concentrate. He found himself thinking about Karina. He could hardly blame the archbishop, really. She was undoubtedly a most persuasive woman. Of course, she had never so much as noticed Gabriel in her imperial passage around the city from one important engagement to another, but he could imagine that if her charm were ever to be turned upon him...

Karina, Karina. As Gabriel sat in reflection a troublesome question began to gather shape at the back of his mind. After a moment he stood up and began to move towards the archbishop’s own office next door, though with an indirect, sideways movement as though he were reluctant to face what he might find there. Or rather, not find there.

He pushed open the door. A glance at the desk told him that it was empty. Wherever Gabriel had left his sketch, it was not in the archbishop’s office. Moving faster now, he went back into his own office and began to ruffle through the papers on the desk. Oh God, no, surely. It was not on his desk. Where had he left the papers for copying?

In the machine, of course. Gabriel swivelled round and looked at the tray on the top of the photocopier where the originals were ejected after the copies had been made. There was the speech. Top page, correct. Second page, correct. Third page, correct. Fourth page, oh God.

Oh God.

Gabriel sprinted out of the office at a pace that would have astonished those familiar with his habitual myopic shuffle, and was down the stairs in seconds without even pausing to lock the door. He took the Lada screeching round the corner out of cathedral square, surprising quite a few tourists who had not previously realised that a Lada could screech. It took him eight minutes to reach the Marriott. He rode the car up onto the grass verge and ran into the lobby. Down the stairs to the conference suite. A

woman was at the conference reception desk. Gabriel stood before her panting for a few seconds before he could form the words.

“I need to speak to the archbishop of Vilnitz. Urgently. Before he gives his speech”.

“I’m sorry”, said the woman. “The lunch has finished. The archbishop began speaking about five minutes ago”.

“Jesus Christ”, said Gabriel.

The woman registered little interest. It seemed, professionally speaking, an unremarkable enough thing for a priest to say.

Gabriel ran up the stairs again and out into the car park. Wherever he was going to go, it would not be back to the office. He could not face meeting the archbishop.

Fifteen minutes later he had parked the Lada in one of the back streets close to the station. He pushed open the door of a seedy-looking bar and went inside. Before returning to Cathedral Square, Gabriel had decided to get seriously drunk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apart from the ecclesiastical correspondent of the *Voice of Vilnitz*, none of the audience at the Vilnitz Philosophical Forum were very fast readers. And in any case, the archbishop was an impressive speaker to watch. The result was that the ecclesiastical correspondent was the only member of the audience who had read ahead of the speaker, and was consequently entirely alone in wondering why the archbishop had chosen to include an illustration in the text of this speech. Particularly this illustration. It showed an instantly recognisable likeness of Karina Burstinaia, with a considerably exaggerated bust, her skirt raised round her waist and leaning forward with her hands on a table, being apparently sodomised by an equally recognisable likeness of the archbishop of Vilnitz, whose face bore a beatific grin.

The ecclesiastical correspondent had been one of those privileged to be present in Vilnitz cathedral on that memorable day when the archbishop had chosen to unveil the charms of Poster Three to his astonished congregation. The archbishop had used it to make a point. Not a theological point, perhaps, but certainly a moral point. The ecclesiastical correspondent recognised that, had he seen Poster Three lurking in the pulpit beforehand, he might have been hard put to imagine what legitimate religious purpose it was to serve. To be honest, the ecclesiastical correspondent was equally hard put to imagine what purpose the illustration to the archbishop’s present speech was intended to serve. But he was happy to give the archbishop the benefit of the doubt for the time being.

He did not have to wait long. Barely twenty seconds after the ecclesiastical correspondent had arrived at the spot, the archbishop himself reached the foot of page three of the text of his speech. There was a swishing of paper, like the briefest breeze in a library, as forty-seven listeners and one speaker simultaneously turned over the page.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Please sit down, Grigor”, said Lidia. “It was good of you to come like this. I’ve had to do a lot of thinking in the last few days”.

Grigor had lit himself a cigarette. Lidia reached out towards him, and wordlessly he passed her another, then flicked his lighter while she took a deep draught, and the shreds at the end burned fierce orange.

“So?” he said.

“So. Well, I’ve decided nothing for certain. But I think it’s quite likely that I won’t stand for re-election”.

“Why’s that?”

“Tiredness, really”.

“Tiredness?” said Grigor. “I don’t want to be unsympathetic, but your political career’s lasted less than eighteen months”.

“That’s true. I’m aware of it, and the worst thing about that is that I shall feel I’ve let you down. But maybe that’s the price of electing someone who hasn’t made politics her life. I think I may be the wrong type”.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure I enjoy it enough”.

“Bollocks”, said Grigor. “You love it. Anyone can see that. You’re just feeling temporarily down. It’s normal”.

“I don’t think so”, said Lidia. “You’re right that I like a lot of things about it. Who wouldn’t? But they’re mostly the superficial things, and the novelty wears off. I don’t think I’ve done anything in eighteen months that I feel really proud of”.

“If so”, said Grigor, “that’s because you haven’t gone about it the right way. You spend too much time just seeing people. Going on visits. Having them visit you. Sure,

that's important. And it's necessary. But do you ever see any of these thousands of visitors a second time? Do you ever have any sustained contact with them?"

"That's not fair".

"I know it isn't", said Grigor with a grin. "But it least it annoyed you".

"Well, it is fair, in that I don't do it enough. You're right".

Grigor sat back in his chair and blew smoke at the ceiling. "Listen", he said at last. "Obviously you must only do this if you want to. Really want to. All over the world thousands, perhaps millions of people dream of becoming President of their country, and devote their lives to pursuing this dream. I've no intention of becoming Palace psychotherapist to the only President in the history of the world who doesn't want to be President. Only you can decide whether it's worth it for you, and I'd rather not try and persuade you. You'd only blame me for it afterwards.

"But. But. I can say why it might be a pity. I don't mean I'm going to tell you how wonderful you've been. You have a steady seventy per cent of the population stroking your ego every time there's an opinion poll, and I wouldn't want you to get big-headed. So let me just suggest a few things you might miss. First of all, I really was unfair when I said you have no sustained contact with anyone. It's true of most people, but one group of people you've forced to come back and see you time after time is the Cabinet. They're not just any old people, you know. They run the country, sort of. It's true that running the country's pretty easy compared to, say, running this city or running their own private lives, which none of them seems to be able to do at all. But you've forced this group of people to come back month after month and give you a semi-coherent account of what they're doing and why. No-one's ever made them do that before. Parliament ought to do it, but doesn't. Czernov never bothered. Stahl himself has power, so he's in it up to his neck. We journalists have an attention span of about three minutes. You're the only person who can make them do it, and who wants to make them do it".

"But I have no power to make them do anything else", put in Lidia.

"That's exactly why you've got the power you have", said Grigor. "If you had any other power you'd be one of them. Look, this isn't the only thing you'd miss, but it's an important one. Here's another one. It is true what I said about how little you see of anyone else. You've spent the last year travelling round your country, but you don't know it. You never visit the same place or talk to the same people twice. Maybe you should think of a second Presidential term as a chance to get to know it properly".

"I don't know how realistic that is, but I see your point", said Lidia. "But you've expressed better than I did one of the things I hate about the job".

“Well, you complain you have no power”, said Grigor. “Formally, that’s true. But you can make people do things for you, and I don’t know what else power is supposed to mean if it doesn’t mean that. Look, how many schools have you visited since you became President?”

“I don’t know. Thirty? Forty?”

“Well, if you carried on at that rate for four years you’d still only have visited a tiny fraction of all the schools in the country. I’m not saying don’t do it, but try a little lateral thinking. Suppose you set up some President’s prizes. With a big prize-giving in the Palace. For all the things you care about, like a mathematics prize for girls, and a cookery prize for boys and a screwing prize for giant pandas. Your mother would love that. Then you’d have all the schools in the country working their butts off all year round for you and sending their teams to cheer their friends in the Palace. And to cheer you, of course. It’s just a little idea, but the general point is about focussing yourself. You’ve been so surprised to find yourself in the job that you haven’t really worked out what to do with it”.

He stopped, lay back even further in his chair and took another deep puff on his cigarette. Lidia was silent for a moment. Then she said:

“Grigor, there’s something else I have to tell you. It’s not connected with this. I mean, I would have done it whatever I felt about standing for re-election”.

Grigor sat upright as fast as his massive bulk would allow.

“Done what?”

“I had a meeting with Karina yesterday afternoon. I gave her the cassette”.

“Why?” There was a hard edge to Grigor’s voice.

“I thought it over, and realised I didn’t want to use it”.

“Then you’re a fool. You don’t deserve to be President. Karina won’t thank you for it. She’ll just think you’re weak”.

Lidia stood up. She looked hard at Grigor for a few moments. Then she walked towards him, stopped, looked down at him again, and in a deft movement reached down to seize the end of his tie. She began to pull on it, at first gently and then harder, so that Grigor’s collar began to bulge outwards.

“Mister Grigor Moratis”, she said, pronouncing the words very carefully. “You’re right that I don’t deserve to be President. But you should think very carefully before you call me a fool. Not many people have done that and got away with it. As it happens,



you're in luck. I'm not in a vindictive mood. In fact, I'm feeling rather pleased with myself. I have a little surprise for you".

She let go of Grigor's tie, and his neck wobbled back into place. He breathed out in noisy relief.

"Anatoly Chikan's lawyers called me late this afternoon. They're prepared to withdraw his affidavit if we drop the case".

Grigor was still for a moment, and then a broad smile spread gradually across his features, like dawn racing over the steppe.

"Congratulations", he said. "And I mean it. That's an impressive piece of work. What exactly does it mean? Is he withdrawing all the allegations unconditionally?"

"Provided we drop all proceedings, yes. No perjury charges or anything, obviously".

"Good for you. But tell me one thing. Why did Karina do it? You'd given her back the tape. Maybe she's afraid of losing the case, but that didn't seem to stop her before. So there's no reason it should suddenly stop her now".

"Correct. And I don't think Karina's been overcome by a fit of kindness, either. Grigor, this may be where the famous Moratis brain has for once been outclassed, not just by mine (which is easy) but by Karina's. You see, I know I've given Karina back the tape. And I also know I haven't made a copy. You know that, too, because I've told you. Though you have to take my word for it. But Karina doesn't know that. And she, unlike you, is smart enough to have worked it out for herself. She's taking no chances".

Grigor was now smiling from ear to ear. "Lidia, if I didn't think you'd take it for an assassination attempt, I'd hug you".

Lidia bent down and planted a kiss on his forehead. "Oooh", said Grigor with a mock lascivious shiver. "What a privilege!"

Lidia turned round and walked back to her chair. As she turned Grigor said:

"There's one thing that still puzzles me, though. Why *didn't* you keep a copy? After all, you're happy enough to let Karina think you did".

Lidia paused in her turn. "Well, for one thing, I want only high-class porn in the Palace collection. And for another,...,well, I did it for me, not for her", she said. "I'm less pure than your caricature of me suggests. I didn't want to use it. But if I'd kept a copy, the temptation would one day have become irresistible".

Lidia walked down to the front desk with Grigor. As they reached the foot of the great staircase she turned to him and said:

“A little while ago you said I didn’t seem to know what I wanted to do with the job of being President. You’re too optimistic. Every day I realise I couldn’t do what I wanted with the job even if I tried. I was just remembering something that happened a few days ago. In fact, the same day you brought me the tape. I was visiting a school, and a little girl was telling me about her parents. They’re sick, and they can’t really work, and there probably wouldn’t be any work for them even if they could. You know, it’s a story you could hear a thousand times. I’ve invited her parents to visit the Palace. It won’t do anything to make them less sick, but it might cheer them up.

“Anyway, just at the end she said something that didn’t strike me at the time, but which I’ve been thinking about since then. She talked about someone who was visiting her father. Asking him for money. Someone very well dressed. I think she was telling me a story about extortion, or possibly blackmail. She probably didn’t realise it herself. Every day I get these little windows onto people’s lives. And there’s nothing I can do about it. I’m too powerful. I can’t act inconspicuously enough”.

“Of course you can’t”, said Grigor. “I mean, you can’t help her in particular. But these dramas would be going on whether you came to know of them or not. And the fact that you do get to know of them may mean that one day you’ll be in a better position to take some general action. It may not help her, but it’ll help others like her”.

They had reached the little metal gateway through which Gregor would have to squeeze himself. Before attempting the challenge he turned and kissed Lidia once on each cheek. “There’s going to be a lot more blackmail and extortion in this country in the next few years”, he said. “The big boys are only just starting to realise how much money there is for them in the new system. If they’re not to take us over completely, we’re going to need some steady hands in the Palace. And elsewhere, of course. You may not be the best street-fighter we’ve ever elected, but you’re as independent a person as we’ve got”.

“I’ve done more street fighting than you might think”, said Lidia quietly, but he did not hear. He had already turned to go.

She watched as he manoeuvred through the gateway, an undisciplined convoy of bodily parts temporarily aligning themselves to sail through a narrow canal. Then he floated expansively out into the late evening air. She could not share his optimism about her capacity for the job, but it was wonderful all the same to discover that Grigor was a friend after all, that he had not become disappointed in her, that he was not one of those negotiating to remove her. Perhaps she should have taken him into her confidence on the subject of Korov. It was too late now, and she was tied to Vladimir, for better or for worse. But it was an enormous relief that her discussion with Grigor was over. Perhaps the single most distressing thing about her entire job was the need to be continually reassessing the loyalty of her friends.

Why, she wondered, as she turned and headed upstairs to her apartment, had she pretended to Grigor that she had not made a copy of Karina's tape? What on earth was she trying to prove?

Still, it would lower the pressure.

## Intermezzo 14.5

There was a dim reddish glow emanating from the lamp in the corner of the room – enough for Magda to work by, but not so much as to oblige her to inspect closely the horizontal male form she was massaging without enthusiasm on the long couch in front of her. She was naked except for dark stockings and a suspender belt, and she was working in silence. The man in front of her was very drunk, and a period of garrulousness had now given way to a kind of stupor that was indistinguishable from sleep, unless she made the mistake of halting the movement of her hands along his back, when he would utter a loud groan and reach out clumsily in her direction. He was a new client, and not a tourist, so she had made more effort than usual to be friendly; the possibility of repeat business was not something to be overlooked in these harsh times. She had even made a pointed enquiry as to his taste in stockings, and had expressed astonishment at his announcement that stockings did not interest him at all.

“You’re the first gentleman to say that in a long time, then”, Magda had said. “Most of my clients are completely wild about them”.

“Not me”, said the man emphatically.

“I’ve even got one gentleman – very important man, you know, very high up, won’t say where, but very, you know, public figure – he insists on me having stockings that match the exact colour of his hair!”

“Mmm”, said the man.

“Black hair and all. Very hard to match the shade”.

“I know who that is”, said the man suddenly. “It’s the archbishop!”

Magda was shocked. “Oh no”, she said. “Not him. Not him at all”.

“Course it is”, said the man loudly. “I know him well. Just his style”.

There had followed a vigorous but mercifully brief argument before the man had collapsed into silence again. Now he was breathing deeply beneath her fingers.

On the couch Gabriel was not asleep so much as in a state of melancholic collapse. He could not see over the rim of his world into the abyss he knew awaited him in Cathedral Square. He had sought refuge in the advice of the ancients: *carpe diem*, seize the day, or rather the evening, but as the ancients had unfortunately forgotten to make clear, the appreciation of wine, women and song sometimes got inconveniently in the way of one another. It was all very well to have a pair of delicate feminine hands

massaging one's lower back, but the sweet yearning it provoked was utterly useless when the rest of one's body felt like an overfilled sack of lard.

A line from Horace came into his blurry brain. "Believe each day that has dawned to be your last". How true that was.

Aloud he said: "*Omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum*".

"I beg your pardon?"

"*Omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum*", said Gabriel again, slightly more clearly this time.

Magda paused. That was what she thought he had said. Like many priests, but unlike many hostesses, she had had an excellent classical education.

"*Grata superveniet quae non sperabitur hora*", she replied.

"Some hour to which you have not been looking forward will prove lovely". The idea hit Gabriel with the force of a revelation.

In fact, realised Magda, the next lines were even better. "As for me, if you want a good laugh, you will find me fat and sleek, in excellent condition, one of Epicurus' herd of pigs".

Aloud she said: "*Me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises Cum ridere voles Epicuri de grege porcum*".

There was a stunned silence for a moment.

"Well, fuck me!" said Gabriel emphatically at last.

Magda sighed, just below the threshold of audibility. It always came to that in the end.

\* \* \* \* \*

Less than a kilometre away from the Palace, in the editorial offices of the Voice of Vilnitz, the editor was gazing thoughtfully at a sheet of paper.

"What a shame the archbishop won't let us publish this", he said. "It's really very talented".

“Not only won’t he let us publish it”, said his ecclesiastical correspondent. “But if he even knew we had a copy, there’d be hell to pay. Maybe literally. You can’t imagine the subterfuge I had to go through to smuggle my copy out of the Marriott. I thought we might even be strip-searched”.

“I suppose it might have alienated some of our more traditional readers”, said the editor wistfully. “Still, I wonder whether we can get some more contributions from the same source”.

“It’s a thought”, said the ecclesiastical correspondent. “It occurs to me that he may possibly be looking for alternative employment”.

Three kilometres away from the offices in which this exchange was taking place, another transaction was beginning. In a small cul-de-sac beside the river, a dark blue BMW had drawn up alongside the verge. A man detached himself from the corner of a building and crossed the road towards it. The passenger door opened before he reached it and the man bent down to get inside. The door closed again with a soft thump.

“Good evening, Vladimir”, said Korov.

“Good evening. Thank you for agreeing to meet me”.

“Well, you have never let me down in the past. When you said it was important I took you at your word. I would not otherwise have come. It’s a very busy time for me”.

“Thank you”, said Vladimir again. “I think you should know that the President has asked me to help her. Directly”.

There was a long silence while Korov pondered the implications of this statement.

“She should not have done so”, he said at last.

## Chapter 15

### News

The room where the news conference was to be held was almost full when Lidia and Stahl walked in, with Irina following behind them. The chatter of conversation ceased as Lidia walked to the podium, laid her text in front of her, raised her eyes and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming here this morning. The Prime Minister and I have a joint announcement. As you know the next Presidential election will take place on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May this year, in just over two months’ time. The nominations close one month before the election. In a spirit of non-partisan co-operation, the Prime Minister and I will lay before Parliament next week a bill to regulate the funding of presidential election campaigns. The text of the bill will be circulated to you at the end of this meeting. You will see that it embodies three main proposals. First of all, all those who have attained enough nomination signatures to register as candidates in the election will be entitled to make a certain number of election broadcasts on public television and radio; these will be paid for by the public purse. Secondly, there will be very strict limits on the election expenditure of candidates and those appointed to act on their behalf. These are designed to ensure that the post of President, which is intended to safeguard the objectivity and non-partisanship of our public life, will be as free as possible from financial dependence upon external and possibly partisan sources of funding. Thirdly, these procedures will be overseen by a new Election Commission, which will consist of independent commissioners appointed on a fixed-term basis and subject to review only by the Supreme Court.

“Many of you will recall that both the Prime Minister and I have said on a number of occasions that we intended to consider the issue of the funding of political parties. We are convinced that these proposals represent a fair and constructive way to regulate this matter, which is quite properly one of public concern. The present bill covers only presidential elections, but we intend to draw on the experience of the election this year. The Prime Minister, together with whoever wins that election, will consider the broader issues of party funding in due course in the light of this experience. Thank you. I will now take questions, and then the Prime Minister will make some concluding comments”.

Several hands were instantly raised. Lidia nodded towards one of the middle rows.

“Anton Mestov, the *Courier*. Your Excellency, many of us expected that an announcement by you about the presidential election would end the uncertainty about your own candidature. Can you tell us now whether or not you intend to stand?”

“Mr. Mestov, the omission was deliberate. I wish to separate the question of my own participation in this election from the issue of how this election should be organised

and what the rules of the contest should be. We are discussing how to referee the match, not who should be in the teams. As it happens, I have still not decided whether I wish to stand. I shall do so before very long and will make an announcement in due course”.

For the second question Lidia picked out a woman at the far left-hand end of the front row. Most of the faces in the room had become familiar to her by now, but this was someone Lidia had never seen before. The woman was tall, black and very striking, in her late twenties and with shoulder length hair. She had listened to the English translation of Lidia’s announcement through an earphone, which she now removed from her ear. Then she stood up and spoke in English:

“Gloria Weston, *Wall Street Journal*. Your Excellency, I’m sure many of us applaud your initiative to bring some rigour into the regulation of election funding. However, as you will know, this issue has been much discussed in other countries, where it has been very difficult to find a way to do this. If you do stand and win in the presidential election, it would obviously be a major disappointment if you were to back down from your intention to reform party funding more generally. That’s a much more difficult challenge. Can you give us your word that you will not back down later?”

Lidia thought carefully before replying. “I’m sure the questioner will appreciate that I cannot make unconditional undertakings, especially about what will happen after the election, an election in which I may not even be standing. I would also be foolish to give undertakings about the precise nature of the measures we would take in the future, when these would depend on what we learn from the experience of operating the measures I have just announced to you. However, I am happy to give you my word that, if I stand and am re-elected to the presidency, there will be a full review of all aspects of party funding. Perhaps the Prime Minister may care to add a few words on behalf of the government”.

She turned to Stahl, who rose to his feet. She knew Stahl would prefer to give as few undertakings to anyone as possible, and would not thank her for cornering him like this. To be honest, she had been surprised and pleased that Stahl should have agreed at all to this joint initiative. It had valuable symbolism as far as the presidential election was concerned, but was fraught with danger for the more serious matter of the parliamentary elections, where real power was at stake. The most likely explanation for his co-operation with Lidia was simply his arrogance: he detested his enforced deference to the plutocrats who were bankrolling his party, and hoped by these measures to be able to treat donors of funds with the same amused contempt with which he treated everyone else. But he knew this was dangerous ground.

“Thank you, Your Excellency”, he said in his dry voice. “I am happy to confirm that the government will undertake a review of the question after the presidential election, in co-operation with whoever may be President as a result of that election”.

He then launched into a series of diversionary remarks about the overall timetable for the presidential election and the parliamentary elections, which were due for the



following year. At another time Lidia might have spent some energy reflecting on the precise difference between “a review of the question”, to which Stahl had committed the government, and “a full review of all aspects of party funding”, to which she had committed herself. But not now. Instead Lidia sat in dreamy contemplation of Gloria Weston, whose long and graceful form was draped on her stubby little chair like silk on plastic, and whose eyes never strayed from Stahl as long as he continued speaking.

She was forced to rouse herself when Stahl sat down. One of the hands raised in the room belonged to Adam Rosati. She was torn between a wish to put him off as long as possible and a sense that this was a challenge she should not run away from. She compromised by picking out one more question about the proposals and then pointing to Rosati.

“Adam Rosati, *Voice of Vilnitz*. Your Excellency, this morning your lawyers issued an announcement that they were withdrawing their action against Mr. Anatoly Chikan. Mr. Chikan has also withdrawn his affidavit concerning the SHEEK advertising campaign. Can you explain to us what pressure was brought to bear on Mr. Chikan to persuade him to act in this way?”

That was easy. “Mr. Rosati, I have brought no pressure against Mr. Chikan except to challenge the accuracy of his allegations in a court of law. I am glad to say he has now seen fit to withdraw them. The matter can therefore be considered as closed”.

There was a moment’s silence. Rosati was evidently struggling to find an appropriate reply. Then, from the other side of the room, a different question:

“Maria Zemeniova, *Voice of Vilnitz*. Your Excellency, the investigation into the death of Secretary Rimov is continuing, but given the length of time since the events concerned the police obviously have only limited evidence available. Can you assure us that your staff are giving full co-operation to the police in this matter?”

“Certainly”, said Lidia. “My understanding is that, so far at least, the police do not have physical evidence but are having to rely on the evidence of witnesses. In the circumstances it is inevitable that progress will be slow. I have already given my assurance publicly that my staff will assist the police in every way, and I am happy to repeat that assurance here”.

“Thank you, Your Excellency”, continued Maria. “Nevertheless, concern has been expressed in some quarters that not all of Your Excellency’s staff may share Your Excellency’s concern for a thorough investigation of this matter. May we have your assurance that you will take action against anyone who is found to have withheld information or impeded the investigation?”

What was she driving at, wondered Lidia? “Mrs. Zemeniova, after what I have just said, such an assurance hardly seems necessary. I should also point out that obstruction of a police inquiry is a criminal offence”.

The press conference closed with some more anodyne remarks by Stahl. As she sat down Lidia reflected on the trap that had been set for her, and into which she had stepped with the stately inevitability of a somnambulist. She herself was already withholding from the police what she knew about Korov, and until Vladimir did what he had promised she would be vulnerable to its exposure. Bizarrely, that made her a temporary ally of Korov himself; the police must not catch up with him before she herself did.

She recalled a time many years ago when her mother had explained to her the principles of chain reaction in response to a question about the atom bomb. "If ten atoms splitting produce enough energy to split another nine, the reaction will eventually die down. The nine produce eight, and then seven, and then six, and it all dwindles away. But if those ten atoms produce enough energy to split eleven more, and then twelve, the reaction will grow, and grow, and grow. Without any end. That, my darling, is an explosion that can mean the end of the world". So, thought Lidia, if ten little lies could be covered up with only nine more, everything might be safe. But if the ten needed eleven in their support, and the eleven needed twelve more, that could indeed be the end of the world.

She shook herself out of this train of thought as the three of them left the room. "Irina", she said, "who was that astonishing woman in the front row? The one from the *Wall Street Journal*".

Irina looked at Lidia with amusement. "Gloria Weston", she said. "I thought you might be impressed. She's doing a three-month tour of central and Eastern Europe, writing some comparative articles on politics. She wants to cover our presidential elections. I think she's hoping to become their permanent regional correspondent, but at the moment she's on some kind of a temporary contract".

"Like me, I suppose", said Lidia. "Well, I thought she was stunning. You'd better invite her to dinner fast".

As they walked up the grand central staircase of the Palace towards the first floor, Lidia felt a sudden surge of melancholy. This magnificent building had outlasted the many powerful figures, good and bad, who had thought themselves its master. Many of them, like her, must have listened to their own footsteps echoing back at them from timber and stone, and have thought they detected in this music some complicity, some assurance of solidity in their tenure of this place. Generations of the deceived had thought they belonged here, until disease, treachery or the anger of crowds had sent them out; more quietly than a faithless lover, the Palace had transferred the pretence of its affections elsewhere.

Lidia knew that it would hurt her to leave this place, but that it might hurt her even more to stay.

Back in the office, she sat down at her desk to work, but she found it hard to concentrate on her official files. Vladimir had promised he would call. Technically speaking, everything was in place. He had said he would call before midday, but it was now four o'clock in the afternoon.

She stood up and walked to the window. Outside lay the great city she no longer knew. It was a year and a half since she had been able to walk unknown and unchaperoned through Cathedral Square. Now it had become a foreign city, glimpsed through glass.

Even thinking about the lovely Gloria caused her a pang. When she was younger, Lidia would have taken a new friend on a breathless tour of the streets. She would have expected no less in return. Show me the buildings, the cobblestones and the turns in the road where your heart is at home, and I shall know who you are. Now Lidia could invite Gloria to a palace, but to nowhere else.

Then, at four-fifteen, there was a knock on the door of Lidia's office, and all thoughts of Vladimir, Korov and Gloria were driven entirely from her head.

It was Irina. Nothing very surprising in that, except that Irina's face wore a look of gravity that, when Lidia came to remember it afterwards, struck her as heartbreaking. It was not her usual look of political protectiveness, the sense of battle harness newly donned. This was something against which toughness was of no avail. Irina was very shrewd.

"Lidia", she said, and her voice was a further warning.

"Yes?" Lidia stood up, and came round the desk towards her.

"Sit down. There's bad news".

Lidia did as she was told.

"I've just had a call from Washington", said Irina. "There's been a plane crash in Central Asia. A small plane on an internal flight came down in the Tien-Shan mountains, in very inaccessible country. Emilia Karlova was on the plane".

Lidia laid her fingers over her open mouth.

"The first reports are extremely confused", said Irina. "It was a very small plane and the press doesn't seem to have much interest in the story. Apparently it's going to take many hours, if not days, for anybody to reach the site. But what news we have says the wreckage has caught fire. There's no chance that anyone could have survived".

Lidia was silent. Then she asked: "Who called?" It seemed a curiously banal question.

“It wasn’t the Bank, actually. It was Emilia’s brother. He said she had left instructions for him to notify you if anything ever happened to her”.

Lidia did not answer. After a moment Irina got up, moved round to the back of the armchair in which Lidia was sitting, and then knelt down behind her with her arms around Lidia’s neck. The two women remained almost motionless for several minutes, while the tears ran silently down Lidia’s face.

## Chapter 16

### Pain

If, at three o'clock in the morning, an owl were to launch itself into the sky above Vilnitz Castle and begin the long flight northward towards the presidential hunting-lodge in the forests of Fehlenberg, it would leave the avenue to its left and cross the wall at the back of the formal garden behind the Presidential Palace. The streets are well lit, though the lamps that illuminate the whole Castle are switched off at two a.m. Northward from the Palace runs another long boulevard strung with ministries, together with the offices of several airlines and a number of foreign banks. Inside one of the solid government buildings, a heavy construction dating from the 1950s in a style that hesitates between classical decadence and socialist realism (as so many people did at that time), a cabinet minister is slowly running his hand up the inside thigh of his secretary, who stands before him with her blouse unbuttoned and holding his despatch box in both hands. She is knickerless under her skirt, and as his hand passes the top of her stocking she gives a tiny tremble, so that the despatch box shakes; it is a refinement he particularly appreciates. Her husband, who believes her to be helping to negotiate an international agreement, is at that moment half a kilometre to the north, on the sixth floor of a grey apartment block, handing to his mistress the gift he has bought her, consisting of a pair of long gloves in black lambskin. He unwraps the package for her while she lies on the bed, smoking a cigarette and twining her fingers in her hair that has become tousled by their lovemaking. She is thinking of the woman she is in love with, who used to work in the factory that manufactured these very gloves, a kilometre northward again, past the river and the little park and the industrial bakery, in the sprawl of suburbs beyond - where, as it happens, that woman now lies asleep next to her boyfriend, a secret policeman. The boyfriend is troubled. He is not in fact a member of the secret police, but has secretly applied to join the ordinary police, and now that his application has been accepted he is wondering how to break it to his girlfriend, who has been an enemy of the police for all of her politically conscious life.

He will not have to wonder for long, as she will soon leave him anyway for the driver of a large Volvo truck that is now parked on a patch of waste asphalt a kilometre to her north, a little way outside the city boundary. In the back of the truck the driver is removing the lace petticoat from a shapely blonde woman of twenty-five, who fell in love with her English teacher when she was eighteen and has never yet been to bed with a man under fifty. She is now about to lose some kind of modified virginity since he is only thirty-eight, though that may not be her motive since she has also concluded that a truck driver is more likely to help her leave the country than an English teacher, especially one who teaches her no English. Leaving the country is her consuming wish. She has worked as a singer in a nightclub to which nobody came, and as an actress playing a minor part in a film nobody now remembers. She has sworn she would kill for an American work permit, but that intention remains hypothetical, as she knows no one who could procure her a document more impressive than a Vilnitz parking ticket. But perhaps she has underestimated the connections of her former English teacher, who is at this moment

exactly ten kilometres to the north, in a green wooden dacha beside a small and nondescript river and a line of stunted poplar trees. He entered the dacha earlier this evening on the pretext of giving an English lesson to its owner, a gentle woman of a certain age who succumbed after the lesson to his charmingly clumsy seduction, because after all it was a long time since anyone had asked her, and because her husband, a cabinet minister whom she hardly ever sees, is away in the city negotiating an important international agreement. She is an intelligent woman, who has begun to suspect that when politicians claim to be negotiating through the night they are usually up to no good, and in a general sense who could disagree? But neither she nor the others have any idea of the extent of this chain in which they are all links, of the way, exceptionally tonight, it stretches out in a straight line northwards into the countryside, and at the same time forms a circle in the space of hearts.

There is a single light above the door outside her dacha, but if the owl were to continue its flight towards Fehlenberg it would see fewer and fewer such lights, apart from a cluster outside the grand new mansion just completed on the edge of the forest by a leading gangster from the city. He has no need of the construction project to launder his money, because he has a chain of businesses in the city to do this for him, but he has fantasies of seeing his children grow up riding and hunting and behaving like gentlemen, or at least like David Niven. His mansion is brightly lit, both to protect it from intruders and to advertise its magnificence; trainee gangsters watch security screens, wonder whether this summer will really see the poolside orgies he has promised them, and dream of one day having mansions of their own. But the rest of the country is dark in every direction, except for a strange glimmer in the distance.

There is a stiff head breeze, and an ordinary owl would have flagged by now. But this is no ordinary owl, and it carries on towards the glimmer as though drawn by a force beyond itself. The ground has begun to rise, and the owl rises with it; the tips of conifers menace its breast-feathers and force it upwards. The wind is making the greenery sway, so it is no longer possible to tell whether it is merely foliage that moves or the whole hillside that is slowly churning. The glimmer in the distance has become a persistent orange dusting of the underside of the clouds. There is the hint of a rumble that is too deep to be the wind, and the owl presses on towards the lake at the heart of the forest. The wind itself has begun to whip and toss, the clouds are now lit in a flickering of orange, there are wisps of smoke and a singeing taste on the air.

She is flying now at a speed to outrun a train. She dips and rears with the ground below her, feels the roaring grow in her ears, until she sweeps over the presidential hunting lodge and soars up against a wall of warmth. The owl has become a witch, and below her the entire lake is on fire.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lidia slept very fitfully, and to strange dreams that, even so, were less terrible than the empty cold she felt on waking. Once, in America, she had been left suddenly by a lover to whom she had become deeply attached, and had thought of it at the time as an experience that made a breach in the normal person's inability to confront the reality of death. To be abandoned irrevocably by someone else reminds us that one day we too, and irrevocably, shall abandon ourselves. But she had been wrong: this was worse, much worse. To be left by another is never quite irrevocable; even if we never see them again we know that the world itself will feel their breath, that they are in another room of the same building, and the knowledge brings us life even as it brings us pain. Now the rooms were empty, utterly empty, and Lidia wanted to howl.

At four a.m. she found herself walking down the long corridor that led to the mirrored room, wearing her silk dressing gown, and barefoot even though the long polished floorboards felt cold. At the door of the mirrored room she stopped and turned. She did not have the key, but would not have dared to go inside even if she had. She could hardly believe in her own substance as it was, and would have felt the sudden vision of herself reflected brilliantly back from every side as a confirmation of her own imminent dissolution, as when the discarded layers of an onion reveal to us that the onion itself has ceased to exist. Instead she looked back down the corridor in the direction from which she had come. There, framed against the doorway, she had seen Emilia's outline on the day she arrived for her last visit.

There was another doorway, too. The doorway to the student canteen in the university, where she had first seen Emilia standing, looking afraid to enter. She was clutching a folder across her chest. Lidia was sitting at a table by herself, with her nose pointedly in a book to avoid catching the eye of the boy in the t-shirt who had been hovering around her for several minutes, but something at the edge of her sight had made her look up. When a doorway is just a thoroughfare people pass through it so fast and so often that the flickering of the light becomes familiar, and what catches our attention is the sustained darkening when someone comes to the door and halts. Lidia put down her book and watched as Emilia steeled herself visibly for an ordeal, then lowered her head and walked firmly towards the food counter. She wore plaits, and a pair of large glasses that made her look studious. They were a mistake: she looked studious enough without them. There and then Lidia had decided to see if she could soften the angularity that this young woman presented to the world.

Lidia was the first woman Emilia had slept with, and there had not been many men before her either. All the more reason to be surprised at her adventurousness, but Lidia soon learned that it was precisely when she felt on most familiar ground that Emilia was at her most guarded. She was a stiff and cautious student precisely because her studies were what she was best at; when she was not expected to excel she took wings.

Another doorway, this time in London, where they had stood holding each other, laughing and crying with vodka as they imagined this might be their last night together, their last night in England, their last night of liberty. And the young boy, a student in chemistry, who had walked past them, quickening his pace at the sight of these two

dangerous women locked in a kiss, and had lingered at the end of the corridor, sneaking a look back in furtive horror and excitement at Lidia as she raised her leg to circle it round Emilia's thigh and pressed her groin against her friend. They had made strange and troubled love that night, and had been almost disappointed to discover that, after so much preparation for the unimaginable, they would continue for months in this banal building with its squeaky linoleum and its smell of paint.

Another doorway again, this time in Boston, where they came to a party and stood together, an arm round each other, looking through the cigarette smoke and the warm air that stank of beer. So many previous parties where Emilia had said "I don't know anyone. Help!" and Lidia had steered her along like an old and favourite barge. But not this time. Emilia had cried out: "Eddie!" and had left Lidia in the corner while she went forward to fling her arms around a solid American boy who looked much like any other solid American boy. Lidia could be very jealous, but her pride was even greater than her jealousy, and in the end she was more jealous of other women than of men.

Now the corridor was empty.

Sometime later she found herself back in her study. Again she remembered Emilia curled up on the sofa; she would not see her there again.

The morning passed like a stately waltz on an empty stomach. Meetings, interviews, representations, handshaking. There were moments when the ache under her ribcage felt so intense that she stared in amazement at the solid citizens with whom she was forced to spend her day, wondering how they could fail to feel it too. And then the really difficult part. The visiting team from the IMF, solid and courteous, all young men in their thirties with glasses and identical suits, thinking carefully before they even said good morning lest this somehow be interpreted as an undertaking. She wondered how Emilia had managed her first meetings with the government in Genghistan. She could not imagine Emilia cold like this; she would have tried harder to charm people, she would have known that the chemistry mattered and that chemistry was not all about looking tough.

At lunchtime Irina came in and said: "It's confirmed. No survivors".

Lidia had said to her: "Don't give me dribs and drabs of news. I couldn't bear it. Tell me nothing until they confirm it, or unless she's found alive. Just don't spin it out".

Emilia had been very proud of what she was doing. She didn't boast, but it was clear that she felt she had found a challenge to match her formidable abilities. Lidia envied her that.

By mid-afternoon Lidia was so tired that she almost fell asleep in the middle of a discussion of agricultural marketing with a delegation from Turnow. As the delegation left she said quietly to Irina: "I'm not well. I'm sorry, but I don't think I can manage to see the others today. Please give them my apologies".



“You have a dinner this evening”, said Irina. “The Vilnitz Film Institute”.

“Is it here?”

“Yes”.

“I’ll do it”.

But returning to her apartment didn’t help. Later, as the twilight gathered, she walked out into the garden. It was hard to imagine making her home here. But it was hard to imagine anything at all. The proper exercise of the imagination required the world to respond, to answer one’s call. Nothing had ever felt as lifeless as the world felt now.

Lidia was still sitting in the garden by the time it had become entirely dark. She heard footsteps on the gravel, and a quiet voice:

“Lidia?”

“Irina! I thought you’d gone home”.

“No. I’m still here. You have the dinner in fifteen minutes”.

“Oh. Yes, I’m sorry”.

“Can you manage it?”

“Yes, of course I can”.

The world never grants us enough space to mourn. Its refusal to do so may be the only humane gesture of which a largely empty universe is capable.

Irina appeared out of the darkness. Lidia offered her a cigarette.

She shook her head. “No, I must go inside”.

“No, stay a minute”, said Lidia. “I want to tell you something”.

“Yes?”

“I’ve decided. I do want to run”.

Irina was silent for a moment. Then she took Lidia’s hand and squeezed it. “Good. I’m very glad”, she said.

A moment later she added: “I think Emilia would have been very proud”.

“I hope so”, said Lidia. “But that’s not why I’m doing it, you know. She would have been the last to advise me to run if my heart wasn’t in it. But I’ve realised this is the best thing I’ll ever get the chance to do. And so I’ve realised that I want it too”.

“Good”, said Irina. Then, ever the professional, she added: “And now...?”

“Yes”, said Lidia. “I’m coming to the dinner. I’m not ready. And I’ll be late. And I look a mess. But I won’t let you down”.

As they walked back towards the palace Lidia said:

“Irina, would you please arrange a press conference for tomorrow. Say it’s an important announcement. And call Grigor to tell him I’m going to run. But to keep it to himself, obviously”.

“I’ll work on the announcement tonight”, she added. “I don’t want to be disturbed”.

There was only one way to cope with tiredness like this, she thought to herself as she mounted the stairs later that evening, much later in fact as the film crowd had seemed determined to demonstrate their bohemian credentials by refusing to leave. It was to force herself to stay awake, to complete a task like a speech or a despatch box and at all costs not to give in to the exhaustion that would destroy her completely if she gave it so much as five minutes’ start.

She reached the first floor and began the long walk down the corridor. She need not have feared there would be any difficulty in staying awake. For although she had given orders not to be disturbed, there was one person who could move through the palace regardless of anything she might command. Konstantin Korov was waiting in her office.

## Chapter 17

### Accounts

Korov had arrived only two minutes earlier. He had been watching the dinner from a distance, stifling his distaste at the pretensions of these intellectuals with their braying voices and their affectations of degeneracy. He had seen the President leave, and had overheard her tell the duty guard at the desk that she would be in her office and did not wish to be disturbed.

As he moved along the corridor to the President's office Korov felt in his pocket for the cassette player on which he had recorded her instructions on that day she had asked him to dispose of Emilia Karlova. Yesterday's plane crash had really come as a most remarkable stroke of luck. Up to now Korov had felt frankly inhibited before the President by his embarrassing failure to carry out her instructions on an earlier occasion. Now he could pretend to her that the crash had been arranged by his own agents, the way was clear for him to force her to acknowledge her dependence on him. The investigation into Rimov's death was beginning to pose an unpleasant threat. Korov had never in his life taken seriously the idea that he might fail, might be exposed, brought down. But that was partly because he had established in his mind and in the mind of those for whom he worked the certainty that anything which destroyed him would destroy them too. Korov's deference to authority was the outward sign of a pact in which the power lay with him.

This President was a little different. Korov had allowed himself at first to be misled by her charm, a foolish mistake he did not intend to repeat. She had used that charm to exploit his loyalty and good will, thinking she could avail herself of his services when it suited her and neglect him otherwise. Now she seemed to be acting as though she could abandon him to his pursuers whenever it proved inconvenient to protect him. Korov despised disloyalty.

He used his master key to let himself into her office, and closed the door behind him. The place to wait was next door, in Mrs. Lentov's office, so he unlocked the connecting door, turned out the light in the President's own office and went through to wait.

Almost as soon as he had done so he heard her footsteps along the corridor. Instead of stopping at the door of her office the footsteps came right up to Mrs. Lentov's door, and for a moment Korov thought she might open it and see him before she had even come inside. Korov had a horror of untidiness, and would dislike nothing more than being obliged to pull her struggling through the doorway. Though he was realistic enough to be prepared for anything, he would greatly prefer to settle matters without the use of physical force.

In the event she stopped, then retraced her steps to her own office door, as though she had forgotten what she had come here to do. Korov heard the door open, and then close again, and her heels click across to the far end of the room. It was time for him to move.

The door of the President's office swung silently open under his pressure, and he walked through.

"Good evening, Your Excellency", he said.

Lidia stared at him in astonishment.

Before she could say anything he held up his hand. "Please, Your Excellency, do not make any comment on my presence here. I understand it must be a surprise, but believe me we have important matters to discuss".

"Mr. Korov", said Lidia, "I do not permit anyone to enter my office without knocking. If you wish to speak to me you may return next door and wait until I am ready".

Korov looked steadily at her. She had made a grave mistake by challenging him so openly.

"I'm sorry, Your Excellency. I do not intend to leave until we have completed our discussions, and I do not advise you to insist. I think you should understand that your situation is extremely dangerous".

"Are you threatening me, Mr. Korov?"

"I am warning you. I sincerely hope the warning will prove unnecessary".

Lidia was silent for a moment. Then she pointed to the chair before her desk.

"Sit down".

Korov did so.

She looked at her watch. "Very well. What do you have to tell me?"

"Your Excellency, the investigation into Secretary Rimov's death has been making further progress. You undertook to ensure that the police were prevented from obtaining access to any potentially dangerous material. I am now given to understand that, far from doing so, you intend to grant them the right to investigate private Palace files. This is unacceptable".

Lidia looked steadily at him and then lit a cigarette. She offered one to him, which he declined with an impatient shake of the head.

“Mr. Korov, I think we had better begin at the beginning. There has been so much misunderstanding between us that we cannot afford this to continue further. Before you do anything else I want you to tell me exactly what took place on the morning of Secretary Rimov’s death. I want to be sure that I understand the circumstances completely”.

Korov was angry. He saw little point in the continuation of this charade. But he was also aware that she was pushing him towards a point of no return. He had a sense of honour, and he wished to be quite sure that the decision to destroy herself was hers alone.

“Very well, Your Excellency. On the morning of Secretary Rimov’s death I walked to his apartment building. You may recall that it is a new apartment set on the first floor of an older converted house, and it therefore contains an external fire escape. I had watched Rimov carefully for some time. I knew he used the fire escape to enter and leave his apartment, though there is also a door internal to the building. He was a man of regular habits, and would always leave at between 7.30 and 7.40 in the morning. I was there from 7.10. At just after 7.30 he opened the door. I killed him and threw his body down the fire escape”.

“How did you kill him?”

“I strangled him until he lost consciousness. Then I struck his head against a railing. I took care to ensure it was a railing against which he could have fallen by accident”.

“Could you have been seen?”

“Your Excellency, I have already said I am not an amateur. I do not stand about in public places advertising my intentions. I chose this place for the job because I was able to see all points from which I could myself be seen”.

“Mr. Korov, why did you kill Secretary Rimov?”

“Because you wished me to, Your Excellency”.

“Mr. Korov, that is a lie”.

So that was it. She intended to deny everything. Even to him. Well, she had made a grave miscalculation.

“Your Excellency, I do not deny that Secretary Rimov’s death was also highly convenient to myself. He was threatening to become an obstacle to a number of legitimate projects of my own. But I have now served three Presidents, and I am not in

the habit of placing my own interests and preferences above those of their Excellencies. I have carried out the removal of inconvenient persons for their Excellencies only when their Excellencies required me to do so, or when this was indirectly necessary to protect their Excellencies' interests. In the present case, you gave me to understand that you would be glad to be rid of Rimov, and I obliged".

"Mr. Korov, I never said to you, directly or indirectly, that I wished you to harm Secretary Rimov in any way".

"Your Excellency, I find it dishonourable that you should seek to pretend that we did not have a conversation that we both know took place".

"Mr. Korov, whatever you may or may not have imagined, I can assure you that I never requested you to harm Secretary Rimov. You say you have been in the habit of assassinating people at the request of previous Presidents. Who else have you removed, as you put it?"

"Your Excellency, my work for previous Presidents was of a strictly confidential nature. I do not discuss it with anyone. I do not intend to discuss with anyone the services I have performed for you. And for that reason, may I say..."

"Mr. Korov", said Lidia, holding up her hand to silence him. "Let me first of all say to you that at no time and in no way have I said, implied or hinted to you that I wished you to harm any person in any way. Your actions against Secretary Rimov were utterly unknown to me and unsuspected by me. Any belief you may have to the contrary is either an insane invention or deliberate fabrication on your part. Now I want to know whether you have caused any physical harm to any other people since I became President. I insist on your telling me in full".

Korov stood up. His dignity and his honour had been impugned. "Your Excellency", he said. "I can see that you intend to deny responsibility for every task that you have requested me to undertake. I had thought better of someone entrusted by the people with the care of our country. But you have made a serious error. I have taped evidence of your request to me to dispose of Mrs. Karlova. Now that I have carried out the assignment that evidence will prove extremely damaging for you. I advise you to stop this futile and insulting pretence".

Lidia stood up slowly behind her desk. She was looking very white.

"What did you say?"

Korov looked surprised. It had been rather simple, he thought.

"What exactly did you just say?"

She was trembling slightly. Korov began to scent her fear.

“I said”, he began with a renewed confidence. He sensed her retreat had begun. It was not before time. He would see that she suffered for her arrogance. “I said that I have taped evidence of your request to me to dispose of Mrs. Karlova. I have a tape here in my pocket that you may care to listen to at your leisure. It is a copy; I have kept the original in a safe place”.

“Mr. Korov, you are insane”.

Korov drew in his breath slowly and carefully. He shifted his head on his neck, and flexed his arms and shoulders, trying to feel the muscle running through his body, checking, assuring himself that this low roaring in his blood was his servant and not his master.

“What have you done?” Her voice was raised, a little unsteady.

Korov closed his eyes for a moment. She was very afraid of him. She had reason to be; she had betrayed him.

“What have you done?!” She almost shouted at him.

“I carried out the assignment yesterday, as you know. My agents brought down the aircraft. It was done for you. It was at your request, and I expected you to be pleased. It was a very professional operation”.

“How dare you!” she shrieked at him. Korov began slowly to clench his right fist. Women did not use that tone to him. Or very rarely. And never without regretting it.

Lidia moved round her desk and advanced upon Korov, her face wild with anger. What happened next surprised them both. She halted just in front of him, but not before Korov had reached out to seize hold of her wrist. She was tall, but she did not look strong, and under ordinary circumstances Korov would have expected to be able to hold her away from him with ease using the force of a single arm. Instead, she pulled her arm away, taking his own arm with her. Her other hand reached out to pull him, his ankle stumbled against hers, and in a second he had been thrown to the floor.

Living in Manhattan for so long had taught Lidia some valuable lessons in self-defence.

For a moment Korov lay winded, motionless in surprise as much as through the physical shock.

“Don’t you dare touch me, Mr. Korov”, she said.

Lidia reached out and picked up her grey telephone. She put it to her ear, then pressed the button in the cradle, once, twice, a third time. She put down the grey telephone and picked up the black one. She frowned. The lines were silent.

Korov stood up slowly. "You are wasting your time", he said. "I took the elementary precaution of disconnecting the lines before I came here. I have already told you that you are not dealing with an amateur".

Now he could see she was really afraid.

It had been a revelation to him that the President knew how to do a passably competent judo throw. Korov was himself an expert in unarmed combat. But he was not sentimental. He had no intention of remaining unarmed.

He hesitated for a moment between the gun and the knife, before settling for the gun. It was a very quiet model, and in any case this office was far enough removed from the security desk to make it unlikely that anyone would hear. Korov was above all a realist, and knew that his chances of permanently evading capture after killing a President were not high. But he would not allow her the luxury of handing him over to the police herself, and then engaging in the disgusting charade of outraged innocence before his eyes.

He moved round to face her, his back to the door.

"Mr. Korov, put that gun down".

"Certainly not", he said, with something close to a sneer. "It is part of my professional equipment. Why, does it make you afraid?"

"Mr. Korov, I have something to tell you".

"There are many things you have to tell me. But you should have done so earlier. I have very little interest in them now".

"Mr. Korov, one thing you should know is that this whole meeting has been videotaped".

Korov said nothing for a second. Tempting though it was to finish things quickly, curiosity momentarily overcame him. He had a tidy mind.

"That's impossible. I am personally in charge of all the surveillance equipment in the palace. There are no video cameras in this office".

"I'm afraid there are. They were installed thirty-six hours ago at my express request. When you came into my office I pressed a switch to set them running. Everything we've said has been recorded".



Korov's pedantry tussled briefly with his sense of the relative importance of things. Unusually, his pedantry lost.

"I am not really interested in what you may or may not have recorded. It may make good history, but it will not change what happens to you now. Before I bring this unpleasant charade to an end, I wish you to know why I have decided to terminate your presidency. As you know, I have served three Presidents. Your two predecessors were men of honour. They would never have sought to escape their obligations in the shameful way that you have done. When they requested me to perform services they undertook in their turn not to betray me. You, however, have chosen to betray me when it seemed convenient for you to do so. That is something I do not forgive".

"Mr. Korov, the services you performed were the product of your own deranged fantasy, not of mine".

Very well, then, thought Korov. I have given you a chance to die with dignity, and you have spurned it.

"Listen to me", he said coldly. "Put out your right hand and turn the chair in front of the desk so that it faces me".

Slowly, hesitantly, Lidia put her right hand out towards the chair.

"Quickly", said Korov.

With an effort that made her grimace, Lidia turned the chair around.

"Now sit down in the chair".

She did so. Korov moved round behind her, with the gun pointed at a spot just below her ear.

"Put your arms behind the chair and place your left wrist over your right".

Korov watched as she did so. The position forced her to lean against the back of the chair. From there she would be quite unable to exert any leverage. She was as though pinned.

With his strong left hand Korov seized the cross made by her wrists. He felt her start in pain as he squeezed them together. Putting down his gun on the desk he felt in his pocket and drew out a length of strong cord. It was the work of seconds to twine it around her wrists, and release the grip of his left hand in the same instant that he tightened the cord with his right. Now she was held fast.

He laid on the desk behind her the little cassette player.

“I want you to listen to this”, he said.

There was a click as he engaged the Play button. Then he moved round. He wanted to look in her eyes, but they were closed.

“Open your eyes”, he said.

She did so just as the voices began.

“Thank you, Your Excellency”, came the voice of Korov, now made almost comically melodramatic by the hissing of the tape. “I think I mentioned earlier that I would be happy to take care of anyone else you particularly wished. Would you like me to do so?”

Then nothing for a few seconds, while the Lidia on the tape and her later incarnation in the chair both pondered the implications of Korov’s question.

“Well”, came the voice of Lidia after what seemed like a long time. The hissing made her sound girlish, very un-Presidential. “There *is* someone. She’s called Emilia Karlova and she’ll be coming to the meeting. She’s with the World Bank. She’ll be staying at the Palace, so it should be straightforward. I’d just like to ensure there are no...complications to her visit”.

Korov moved round behind her again and switched off the tape.

“You see?” he said, his voice the quieter for his feeling of triumph. “Everyone will know that you were no innocent victim”.

Lidia’s eyes had closed again. When she spoke it was in a quiet, tired voice.

“I had not imagined”, she said, “that among my staff there might be someone not only insane, but also someone so stupid that he has forgotten the existence of a world in which words have their ordinary meaning. When you’ve killed me I want you to replay that tape again to yourself. Try to imagine a world in which Presidents are unimportant and assassinations do not happen every day. A world in which people play with their children and in which taking care of someone means exactly that. I used to know a world like that, and I’ve not forgotten it. Sometimes I wish I had. It left me unprepared for the world I live in now”.

While she was speaking Korov had been moving round slowly so that he now stood in front of her. He was conscious even as he did so of a curious sequence of developments. A few moments ago he had been on the verge of a great rage. His pulse had been fierce, his breath short, and he had felt steal upon him an old, familiar power. It was a power he had used in the past to dangerous effect, and for a moment he had thought he would find himself re-enacting with the President of his country a culmination

he had previously known only with women of the most worthless kind. It would not be inappropriate: she had debased the institution by her occupancy of it. But something in her matter-of-fact attempt to negotiate with him, albeit with her absurd story about the videotape, had suddenly changed the mood. He had become cold, efficient, practical. It had become a question of finding a quick way to kill her and then to leave the Palace as inconspicuously as possible.

Now his calm practicality was leaving him again. She had called him insane. She had called him stupid. She had patronised him, as though she did not believe he was really prepared to hurt her.

He began once again to be aware of his own deep pulse.

Still holding the gun in his right hand, Korov reached with his left for the knife that lay in its sheath under his right shoulder. He drew it out slowly, then held it in his hand, feeling the magnificent balance of the steel. He laid the gun down on the floor, then with his free right hand drew from the side pocket of his jacket a length of silk. It was a single stocking. SHEEK, naturally.

Everything would end as it had begun.

As if on cue she opened her eyes.

It took her a moment to focus on the scene before her. Her face was very white. Korov took particular pleasure in moments such as these; he was used to looking carefully at the eyes of those he killed. Now, as the details of her predicament fell into place before her, he noticed that her pupils were dilating. Behind the magnificent brown of her iris each eye was opening itself up to him. It was the sign of fear, and to Korov it was the mark of his triumph. A triumph to be savoured, and a triumph also that sent his blood coursing once more, that entered a note of savagery into his pulse, that shortened his breath.

He transferred the stocking to his left hand, then bent to pick up his gun once again from the floor. He wished her to see what luxury of choice he had allowed himself, with what connoisseurship he intended to effect her dispatch. Then he lowered both hands for a moment, to take a last look at those eyes that had given themselves up to fear of him.

As he did so there was a loud and sharp explosion. Korov's forearm seemed itself to explode in anger and pain, and his gun flew out of the hand, describing a curiously delicate trajectory to land in the far corner of the room.

He had not looked at her carefully enough. Her eyes had widened, certainly, but they were not focussed on him. They had been watching the door open silently behind him and the marksman take aim.

They continued to watch as the two dark figures moved as though through air, pinning Korov's hands behind him before he had even sunk to his knees.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took only three or four seconds for the room to fill with people.

In fact there were no more than six people in the office besides herself. But Lidia was confused. She felt a hand on her right arm and another round her shoulder. Irina Lentov was asking her "Are you all right?" To her left there was the tall form of Vladimir. There was a stretching feeling in her arms, then a relaxation as the cord binding her wrists was released. Hands lifted her from the chair, then Irina steered her towards the corner, where Lidia sank gratefully into the sofa. She closed her eyes a moment, before opening them again in curiosity at how the world had changed.

She was facing the desk. To her left a man she had never seen, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, was holding the arms of the kneeling Korov tightly behind his back, while another man, similarly dressed, was searching Korov very thoroughly. A third man, dressed in a grey suit and with a face Lidia found familiar, was standing next to the door. Irina was sitting on the sofa on Lidia's right. Standing a few feet in front and facing her was Vladimir.

Lidia gave him a broad smile of relief, and then formed a look of puzzled inquiry.

"How...?"

Vladimir grinned. "I went beyond your instructions", he said. "When I installed the camera I put a small transmitter inside it that would send me a signal whenever it was switched on. I never trusted Korov to wait till you'd set up the interview. So when it started bleeping a few minutes ago I knew we had to get here very fast".

"And who are these men?"

"Oh yes. I'm sorry. Let me present you". He indicated the man standing by the door. "Your Excellency, this is Mr. Michnik, head of security at the Interior Ministry".

Lidia smiled and nodded at him. Yes, of course, she remembered him now, though she could not have said from where.

"You see", said Vladimir. "From the moment I realised we needed a way to get here quickly if Korov came to you unexpectedly, I knew we had to find someone who could get into the Palace without having a clearance from Korov. I couldn't have done it by myself. So I approached Mr. Michnik. We had two of his most trusted officers standing by. As it was, the men at the desk downstairs were very unhappy about letting us

in. We had to get one of them to try your telephone to show them it had been disconnected. Even then it was only Mr. Michnik's pass that finally persuaded them".

Lidia nodded slowly. It was all a bit too much to take in.

"Oh, and Mr. Michnik also strongly advised us to work with Mrs. Lentov. I approached her only a couple of hours ago. We were going to put the whole plan to you tomorrow morning. But unfortunately Korov moved first".

"But fortunately you got to him in time. That's all that matters".

One of the two men who had been searching Korov now came up to Michnik. The two turned away from Lidia and exchanged a few words in a low voice.

"May I see what Korov was carrying?" asked Lidia.

Michnik and the officer turned round. The officer held out his hands. In them lay the knife, a handkerchief, a set of keys and a single silk stocking.

"Mr. Korov obviously has excellent taste in stockings", said Lidia. "They're the SHEEK President brand, if I'm not mistaken".

There was some nervous laughter.

"Can't you take him next door?" asked Lidia.

"Certainly", said Michnik, and made a signal to the men, who lifted Korov to his feet and took him through the door into Irina's office, closing the door behind them. There was a small dark stain on the carpet where he had been kneeling.

"You have Mrs. Lentov to thank for the fact that we could open the door in complete silence", added Michnik. "We were afraid we would have to make a rush attack".

Lidia turned to Irina in surprise.

Irina laughed. "I told them I'd always considered it part of my duties to ensure the hinges to the office doors were oiled. I don't know whether I was thinking of an incident like this, but it came in useful in the end".

Lidia laughed too, and put an arm round Irina, kissing her on the cheek.

Michnik took out a mobile telephone. "Just calling for reinforcements", he said. "We need to put Korov somewhere secure. I'll also notify the police". He began to dial.

"When you've finished may I make a call?" asked Lidia.

Vladimir reached into his pocket and passed her his own telephone.

Lidia dialled a number she knew by heart.

After four rings it was answered.

“Maria?” said Lidia.

“Yes?”

“This is Lidia”.

Silence for a moment. “President Lidia?”

“Yes. I know it’s late, but I want you to come here now. Right away. I think I have quite a story for you”.

\* \* \* \* \*

Irina came into the private study in the presidential apartment carrying a tray of coffee. “Grigor’s on his way”, she said to Lidia. “His first words when I called him were ‘Do you know what fucking time this is?’”.

Lidia and Maria both laughed. “Serve him right”, they said simultaneously, then laughed again.

Maria took a cup and stirred in a spoonful of sugar. “So”, she said, turning to Vladimir, “there’s still something I don’t understand. You said you went to see Korov a few days ago, after Lidia talked to you. Why did you do that?”

“Well, we took a gamble that didn’t work”, said Vladimir. “The original idea was that it might be unnecessarily dangerous to try to record Korov in the office here. So I went to see him. I was wired up. I’d had dealings with him before because I’d supplied and installed equipment for him. Routine security stuff, nothing sinister. So I said the President had asked me to help her check through all recordings we might have that were of relevance to the Rimov case. Because she was going to grant the police access to the palace files. I hoped to get him to talk about his involvement, about what the police might be looking for. That would have given us the evidence we needed, without having to involve Lid – to involve the President, at all. But he was very suspicious. In fact, worse than that. He was quite angry that she had talked to me at all. Of course, I didn’t tell him she’d said anything about Korov himself. I just talked to him in his role as head of security, because it was a delicate matter. But he must have suspected”.

“So that was when you decided to install the equipment in the office?”

“Yes. The idea was that she would ask him to a meeting, and we’d have the cameras running and people waiting to arrest him when he came out. I came in and did the work two nights ago, and talked to Michnik yesterday. But of course things happened faster than that”.

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“Well, we talked a lot about that. The problem was that Korov seemed to have so many spies in the system that we didn’t know if we could risk it till we’d actually got the evidence. I hesitated between them and Michnik, and went for Michnik in the end. He’s pretty reliable. He ran the security for the big World Bank and European Bank conference last year, and it seemed pretty obvious that he and Korov were rivals, not allies. And, after all, he was the one who vetted Irina”.

“Okay”, said Maria. Then she turned to Lidia. “Did you ever just consider going to the police with the evidence you had? I mean, the fact that Korov had already confessed to you? I mean, after all, you are the President. Your testimony would have been enough. He could have been arrested without any need for these elaborate recordings”.

Lidia thought a moment. Then she said: “Can you put your notebook away a moment? This bit is off the record. Yes, of course I thought about it. But this had become in some sense a political crime. I mean, it was perceived that way. And when it’s a political crime, then the President is the last person anyone believes. I knew a taped confession from Korov was the only way people would be sure he hadn’t been made to take the blame. So as to cover up for me”.

“Yes, I see that”, said Maria. Then she added, anxiously: “Lidia, are you all right?”

Lidia had sat forward in her chair and covered her face with her hands. She was trembling.

“Irina”, she said, and then sat up. “Korov said something horrible. I don’t know how I could have forgotten it, but with all the drama it was driven out of my mind. He said he caused the plane crash. His people sabotaged the plane”.

Irina looked startled. “He said that?”

“Yes”.

“But why?”

“I don’t know”.

“He must be lying. They still don’t know what caused the crash, but they think it was pilot error. And there were witnesses who saw it happen. There was no explosion or anything”.

“I’m sure he’s lying”, put in Vladimir. “There are lots of stories about Korov and his activities here inside the country. No one’s ever suggested he had the contacts or the resources to pull off something large overseas. Let alone in central Asia”.

“How can you be sure?” asked Lidia. She was close to tears. “I could kill that bastard!”

Irina moved to sit on the arm of Lidia’s chair, and put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s completely impossible”, she said in a quiet voice. “Sure, Korov’s a bastard, and he would have done it if he could. But the fact is, he didn’t. It’s just one of those awful, horrible accidents. He took advantage of it to try to put pressure on you. But it was nothing to do with him. There’s not reason why it should have happened now, except that it did. There’s never a right time for accidents to happen. This was horrible, but it was horrible in its own way. Not, thank God, in Korov’s way”.

There was silence again. In a world full of deeper conspiracies than Lidia had ever imagined, some disasters could still happen without being planned by anyone.

In the euphoria of her own escape Lidia had forgotten that Emilia had not escaped. That dull truth lay heavy on her now.

For the first time since Korov had come into her office, Lidia felt her exhaustion return. She felt at her wrists, which were still raw where the cord had cut into them.

But there was little time to indulge her exhaustion that night. Irina moved in and out of the study, bringing messages, requests and sometimes visitors. Michnik returned. A delegation of three policemen arrived for a preliminary interview. A press statement was prepared. Grigor arrived. Vladimir took a series of photographs for the morning editions, photographs of Lidia, of the office, of the corridor, of anything that moved inside the palace and of a great deal that didn’t. As news of the night’s events spread, there was a stream of telephone calls, most of which Lidia declined to take, except one from the White House, where it was still evening, then one from the Kremlin, where it was now early morning. “Kind of them to call”, she said after the second, speaking to nobody in particular. “I guess this is the kind of thing that frightens them too”.

Then, sometime soon after dawn, Irina came into the study again. “I’m sorry”, she said, smiling apologetically at Lidia. “You really deserve just to go to bed and have a long sleep. But the entire press corps is camped out downstairs. I think they’re hoping to see you, just to be reassured you’re still alive”.

“I suppose that’s natural”, said Lidia.



“Anyway, I have an idea. You were supposed to be giving a press conference at eleven o’clock anyway. About your decision to run. Had you forgotten?”

“I had, yes”.

“You haven’t changed your mind?”

“Because of that shit Korov? You must be joking”.

“Why don’t you do the two together now? The press are all here anyway. You appear before them as the survivor of the assassination attempt, and then tell them that by the way you’ve decided to stand in the elections. The fact that someone tried to kill you has made you realise how important it is that you realise your hopes for a second term. Something like that. You’ll ride the crest of a wave. Plus you can then go back to bed”.

Lidia smiled. “I guess it’s a good idea. But I’ll tell them I was going to announce my candidacy anyway. I don’t want them thinking it was a decision made entirely on an adrenaline surge”.

She stood up. “But you must give me half an hour, maybe a bit longer. I must have a quick shower, then put my face back on again. I can face a madman when I’m unarmed, but I can’t face the press corps when I’m not made up”.

“Oh”, said Irina. “That reminds me. I also have a message for you. Gloria Weston’s downstairs, with the rest of the press. You remember, from the *Wall Street Journal*?”

“Yes, I remember”.

“Well, she asked me to tell you she’s glad your experience of living in Manhattan finally proved useful for something”.

Lidia grinned. “Tell her I’d be glad to swap war stories with her sometime. Now I must go and get my shower”, she said.

In spite of her exhaustion, in spite of her misery, it was curiously comforting to Lidia to realise that she could still feel a whisper of something approaching pleasure at the news that Gloria would be in the audience. After a night in which she had been reminded brutally of the disadvantages of her job, it was good to realise that the Presidency could also bring with it some charming consolations.

## Epilogue

A hot summer afternoon in Vilnitz was drawing to a close. A demented pigeon that had overdosed on discarded crisp packets was strutting round Cathedral Square picking fights with any creature less than fifty times its own size. Young tourists of various sexes and nationalities were discovering that the fountain provided an ideal pretext for the removal of many of their clothes. An itinerant ice-cream seller was congratulating himself on doing more business in an afternoon than he had done in the nine months between September and May. In the midst of the general euphoria a taxi was making its way doggedly through the crowds and the mess. It reached the traffic lights that guarded the exit from the Square, and then, as though in relief, roared off into the early evening traffic.

It continued for several minutes through the streets and up the hill, then turned right and disappeared into the maze of little lanes that led up towards the Castle. It turned right again and pulled in to a little courtyard. It stopped, and the driver sounded his horn.

A door opened at the top of the steps and a woman in her sixties appeared, followed by a younger woman of around thirty. They went to the back of the taxi, and, under the driver's ineffectual supervision, removed from the trunk a folding wheelchair, which they unfolded and set up next to the rear left-hand door. Opening the door, they helped out an elderly man. Once settled into the wheelchair he looked up at the younger woman and said: "Well!"

She bent down and kissed him on both cheeks.

"I've survived my first outing in two years!" said Rudi in triumph.

"I think it's done your father the world of good", said Marta.

They manoeuvred the wheelchair up the steps, through the door and the kitchen beyond, and into the small living room.

"So how's the archbishop?" asked the young woman.

"I've never seen him better", said Rudi. "He's made a great recovery. You may have heard. He had the most embarrassing scandal. Some story about pornographic drawings he was circulating. He denied it, of course, but no one believed him. It threw him into such a depression that he lost his faith. Since then he's been a changed man. Everyone says so. The best archbishop we've ever had. Does his pastoral duties with a new energy. Doesn't bore people any more with his metaphysics. And I must say, I thought he was in great shape".

"I thought he usually came to see you".

“So did I”, said Rudi. “But he hadn’t come for a while. So Marta called him up and said it was time he did. He just told her I was an old malingerer. Said I’d been sick for three years and hadn’t got any worse, so I could bloody well come and see him instead. So that’s why I went today. Glad I did, too. Forgotten what fresh air was like”.

Rudi broke off and began to cough, lightly at first but eventually in a series of heavy spasms that shook his whole chest. Marta moved forward and laid her arms around his shoulders.

“You need to rest”, she said. “It’s been a lot of excitement”.

Together the two women wheeled Rudi into his bedroom, helped him out of his wheelchair and laid him on the bed before folding the blankets over his wasted form. Rudi leaned towards his daughter and began wheezing inaudibly at her. She bent her head down and heard him say:

“Lucky bastard. He’s got a new secretary. The old one’s become very grand. Some sort of journalist, does filthy cartoons for the *Voice*. Anyway, the new one’s a great improvement. Girl in her forties. Very well preserved. I’m sure he’s shagging her. Wouldn’t mind shagging her myself”.

“I don’t think you should shag anyone just at the moment”, said his daughter in a soothing voice. “Get some sleep first”.

“It’s the President, you know”, said Rudi in a contemplative mumble, to the world at large. “I always said she’d be a disaster. And so she has. But she’s done the archbishop a power of good. He was the one who got her elected in the first place, so I suppose she’s just returned the favour. I think they were made for each other”.

In the little courtyard outside his bedroom a couple of blackbirds began a quarrel that Rudi in his self-congratulatory delirium mistook for applause. While the prophetess Cassandra had at least managed to provoke someone to murder her, it was Rudi’s fate to be ignored to the end even by the minor fauna.

A few miles away, at the Swissair business class check-in at Vilnitz airport, a tall woman in a suit of cool blue silk was also thinking about the archbishop, and about the returning of favours. Margarita Liumov was on the way to visit her son in his boarding school near Geneva. She was reflecting that she would never have been in a position to enjoy this privilege if she had succeeded in persuading the archbishop to intercede for the return of her kidnapped husband. Of course, the payoff from Korov, generous though it was, had not in itself transformed her lifestyle. But one thing had led to another, and the control she had come to exercise over her late husband’s business affairs had given her extremely valuable information about Korov’s activities, information her late husband had lacked the imagination to employ to its full potential. The subsequent collaborations with an initially reluctant Korov, and the natural way she had taken over his networks after his arrest had made her very wealthy indeed. One thing piqued her: there had been

no time before the arrest to tell him that it was she who had arranged the crash of Mrs. Karlova's plane. She had intended to surprise him, to remind him of that time he had complained that the elimination of Mrs. Karlova would have to await her return to Vilnitz, little suspecting that Liumov had had extensive contacts in Central Asia upon which his more entrepreneurial widow could call.

Korov was old-fashioned, really; he thought too much like a communist. He believed in the solidity of such inventions as national frontiers and in the reliability of the people who manned them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Liumov was seriously considering whether the time had come to arrange for his escape from prison. A Korov in prison was at least prevented from threatening her newly enjoyed supremacy, but the man had many valuable talents, in spite of or even because of his limitations. A Korov free but in hiding might be persuaded to use these talents to her advantage while remaining comfortably dependent on her for his personal safety. There was a risk, certainly. But after all she owed her own success almost entirely to him. Capitalism had taught Mrs. Liumov above everything the importance of loyalty to the more useful of one's friends.