

Prologue

They were up there, somewhere. Watching.

He could sense their presence. And it made him feel uncomfortable.

Sergeant-Major Brian Hunt allowed himself a terse smile beneath the white silk ski-mask that covered his face.

'Uncomfortable'. 'Comfortable'. Such terms were relative just below the Arctic Circle in Norway where the cold would crack the fillings in your teeth if you laughed too long at a joke. Not that there was much to joke about.

Comfort was zero degrees and respite from the unforgiving wind. It was catching four hours' sleep undisturbed, and putting on dry socks in the morning.

And discomfort? Hunt grimaced. That was just about every damn thing else.

Still, being watched was the most uncomfortable thing of all.

He checked himself. His mind was starting to wander. It was better than any watch to tell him that their stag was nearly up.

Their observation post had been created at the head of the mountain valley. From it they had a clear view all the way down to the road. Only the fluorescent marker wands marked its course through the undulating snow dunes.

Hunt's team had moved silently into the position three nights earlier. In the natural glimmer of reflected snow they

had stretched out the lightweight white camouflage net and begun burrowing underneath it. At first the hole was scarcely big enough for each two-man shift. Just a six-foot oblong recess scraped away, leaving a twelve-inch parapet and a six-inch observation slit below the netting canopy.

But, as they planned to use the location as a base for some time, the OP grew a little every day. Each stag would do some nest-building; it helped to pass the time. Snow was never thrown out to leave tell-tale signs, but compacted and sculptured. Now it boasted two benches with a six-foot gap between, almost deep enough for a man to stand in and stretch his legs.

Sergeant-Major Brian Hunt had one bench, Corporal Bill Mather the other. Not that it was easy to distinguish his companion in the gloom, even a few feet away. Just a sinister apparition in white from head to foot.

Mather saw Hunt looking and tapped his watch. Time? Hunt nodded.

The two men dropped from the snow benches and met in the middle gap.

Mather's eyes in the apertures of his ski-mask were grey and as icy as the surrounding snow. He kept his voice low; sound travelled easily in these conditions. 'They're there again, Brian.'

Hunt said: 'I know. Have you seen them?'

'I don't need to. I can *feel* them.'

'So no sighting?'

Mather shrugged. 'I picked up some movement with the night sight. In the treeline.'

'Not a reindeer?'

'No, Brian. Three or four dark shapes. Moving cautiously. Human.'

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Hunt nodded. It confirmed his own observations over the past half-hour using the lightweight Spylux image-intensifier.

He felt his anger rising. It had been a particularly tough year and his team had been looking forward to this task during the run-down to Christmas. Just over two weeks of reconnoitring locations for the big annual NATO exercise due to start in the New Year. A welcome break from the pressures of routine front-line soldiering as they decided on the siting of firm bases, hides, and food and ammunition caches to meet the demands of the exercise scenario.

With more time than usual available for the task, Hunt had decided to use their vehicle sparingly and travel on skis as much as possible. Two of their number hadn't skied for several years and it was an ideal opportunity to improve their skills whilst getting in some practical Arctic survival experience. In fact, an almost leisurely interlude compared to their more usual assignments.

But it hadn't worked out like that.

For the third time in two weeks they'd found themselves under observation, and had been obliged to make a discreet withdrawal. Standard procedure when a genuine 'hostile' contact is made in peacetime. And, dammit, they'd had to mount stags as if they'd been going tactical!

Some bloody holiday it was turning out to be – thanks to the prying eyes of the four mysterious skiers.

Not that their identity was any longer a total mystery. After the first encounter, Norwegian Intelligence had persuaded the local police to make low-key enquiries at all the remote farms and settlements in the area.

At last they found a semi-reclusive trapper who was able to shed a little light on the strangers. They had, he said, called at his isolated log cabin one night during a particularly

ferocious blizzard. In immaculate Norwegian they informed him they were Finns. Three men and a woman. They were on a hunting expedition when one of them, a good-looking young man with fair hair, had badly twisted his knee. They had stayed for two days until the blizzard had died and the youngster's leg had made a substantial recovery.

Pressed by the police, the trapper was unable or reluctant to add much more. They had been, he said, stiffly polite and not given to conversation. Either with him or between themselves. And somehow he had not felt inclined to ask questions.

Why? persisted the police.

There was something about them that was a little sinister, admitted the trapper. Something quietly menacing.

For a start he hadn't believed a word of their story. No one went hunting for pleasure in such conditions, even crazy Finns. Certainly not without a lodge to return to each evening where you could dry out in front of the wood-burner, have a good meal and a bottle of something to warm your insides. Winter backpacking on skis was for the young, strong and partially insane. It was certainly no place for a woman. And yet somehow the trapper had the feeling that it was the woman who was the leader of the party. He sensed that she was the one the others consulted; the one who made the decisions.

And another thing, their clothes. They had come to his lodge dressed in subdued quilted anoraks. Cross-country skiing, even in sub-zero temperatures, is hot work. Lightweight windproofs would be the order of the day.

Later the trapper thought he knew why. When one of the group was unpacking the small khaki rucksack that each carried, he glimpsed the neatly packed set of wind-proofs. Not in the latest dayglo fashion colours for safety, but cam-

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whites. Admittedly useful for reindeer hunting, but definitely the sort of thing that soldiers wear.

Their guns, too, were kept hidden in canvas cases. With the avid enthusiasm that fellow hunters usually share for swapping knowledge and examining each other's rifles, the trapper had asked to see them. 'What make?' 'What calibre?' 'What range?' 'Is better than my trusty Krag?'

All these questions were stillborn after his first enquiry met with deafening silence and a hostile glare from the eldest man.

But then the glare had softened. The Finn had smiled and produced a flask of vodka from his backpack.

So from then on the trapper had decided to keep his thoughts to himself, and fill his head with alcohol rather than wild imaginings. If this strange group were Norwegian special forces, then so be it. It was none of his business.

Brian Hunt's eyes moved back to the observation slit and the treeline on the opposite side of the faintly luminous valley.

That was how 'Volga Olga' had been born amongst the Mountain Troop of his Squadron of 22 Special Air Service Regiment.

For *they* knew that the strange party of Finns were not Noggy 'funnies'. Not with a woman amongst them. They had to be Soviet. And, operating illegally in hostile territory, they could only be Spetsnaz. Behind-the-lines specialist sabotage and diversionary troops. The cream.

But Volga Olga's team had to be something special. Clearly they were not conscripts. That suggested they were from one of the highly professional headquarters companies which even most other Spetsnaz personnel didn't know existed.

In wartime they would be given the most difficult tasks, such as the assassination of political and military leaders. But

in time of peace they would, like their SAS counterparts, train with total realism. No doubt they too had deliberate lapses in navigational efficiency which allowed them to wander across borders. In the vast wilderness of northern Norway, and given their skills, there was little chance that they would ever be found.

The calm way in which they had confidently adopted a cover story for the benefit of the old trapper, and their perfect mastery of Norwegian, was quite chilling.

Corporal Bill Mather's voice broke into his thoughts. 'You want we should withdraw again?'

Before Brian Hunt could reply they heard footsteps behind them. The icy night air had formed a crust on the snow and the relief's boots squeaked noisily.

The white-clad bulk of Sergeant 'Big Joe' Monk slithered down into the OP. 'Len's on the airwaves. Heard something that might interest you.' He sounded amused.

'And what's that?' Hunt asked.

'There's a Cadre squad doing a mini-exercise to the north. Their BV's got a burnt-out clutch and shed a track. They've left an officer and signalman in the warm' – he raised his eyes as if to say 'Typical!' – 'whilst the rest get back to bring in engineer support. Apparently they're stuck in the arse-end of nowhere. Anyway, Len says the team is skiing this way and he wondered if you fancied giving 'em a little surprise? A spot of tactical training, so to speak.' There was a distinct hint of mischief in the voice.

Despite his preoccupation with the presence of the elusive Spetsnaz team, Hunt couldn't resist a grin of anticipation beneath his ski-mask.

'Who's commanding the party?'

'Dusty Miller.' Knowingly.

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The Mountain and Arctic Warfare Cadre were old adversaries. The *real* snowmen. They were a small elite unit of Royal Marines whose main function was to train 'Mountain Leaders', for dispersal to other Marine and Army units, where they would pass on their highly specialised knowledge.

But in times of crisis the 'Cadre' had another role in the Scandinavian theatre, penetrating behind enemy lines on sabotage and reconnaissance missions. Although similar in function to the Mountain Troop of each SAS Squadron, they 'specialised' in Arctic conditions, whereas Brian Hunt's team might find themselves practising their art in mountains anywhere from Norway to Oman, Spain or Africa. Sort of jack-of-all trades and, the Cadre would undoubtedly provoke, the master of none.

It was the underlying reason why, to Hunt's knowledge, only one SAS man had ever passed the Cadre's gruelling course. The 'failed' candidate would return to the Regiment's barracks in Hereford armed with new knowledge to be adapted to 'the SAS way of doing things'. Over a drink in the mess he would happily relate how the Cadre took themselves too seriously. It would never enter his head to admit that, in the Arctic, the Cadre was simply the best there was.

Hunt said: 'Dusty, eh? Hell, it is Christmas.' An opportunity to bounce the Cadre could not be missed. Besides, it might just provide a chance to . . .

Mather said: 'Our friends are back, Joe. Peel your eyes on eleven o'clock. Just in the treeline.'

Big Joe Monk said: 'Volga Olga? Shit! She gets around.'

Hunt slapped his shoulder. 'Bill and I are turning in. I'll send Len down in a few minutes.'

Monk showed his large, square teeth, like a row of tombstones. One was missing. 'Okay, Brian. There's a brew on.'

It took only moments for Hunt and Mather to negotiate the trench to the snowdrift.

The eighteen-inch entrance hole was at the base of the drift, hidden from view by a shallow gully. Hunt went down on his knees and led the way in. Even after years of experience, snowholes still unnerved him. He had to fight back the feeling of claustrophobia as he squeezed his way along the slippery ice tunnel that inclined gently for some twenty feet, before opening up into a snow cave just high enough for a man to stand in. Automatically he waggled the ski-pole that had been poked into the ceiling of smooth snow to provide an airhole through to the top of the drift.

Corporal Len Pope's long frame was sprawled on a shelf the size of a double bed, which had been fashioned out of compacted snow. He grinned as he pulled off the radio headset. 'Did Big Joe tell you about Dusty Miller and his bootnecks?'

Hunt nodded, removing his fur-lined forage cap and his ski-mask. The warmth and quiet of the snow hole was a stunning and blessed relief. A single stubby survival candle provided light and kept the temperature at a pleasing zero degrees. And, like a miner's canary, it warned if the oxygen supply had been lost. When the candle went out, it meant that there'd been a fall-in and there were just minutes left to dig yourself out. 'Give me the details, Len.'

Len Pope glanced at his notepad. His accent was broad Hampshire, and he had the infuriating habit of giving gender to inanimate objects. 'The BV's stuck fast about forty clicks to the north,' he said, using the military abbreviation for kilometres. 'She's stuck in some pretty dire terrain. The engineer unit is new out here so they reckon it's easier to show them the way in. If you ask me it's just Dusty's way of giving his lads a bit of extra hard training. A nice night ski-march.'

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Hunt nodded. Typical Miller, he thought. Pain is character-building. Give them the hardest time of their lives just when they thought they were in for a cosy few days in the warmth of the Volvo Bandvagn tractor.

'If Dusty pushes them at forty clicks a day,' Pope added, 'then I reckon they'll be here around late morning. They've given the compass-bearing they'll be travelling. I calculate it'll bring them out through this valley.'

Hunt helped himself to the steaming mess tin on the two-man Naphtha stove and poured some of the contents into his mug. 'There's a problem.' The hot chocolate was thick. Sticky and sweet. Glorious.

'How so?' Pope asked.

Mather took the remainder of the drink from the stove. 'Volga Olga's back.'

Pope clearly didn't believe it, or want to.

'We're sure,' Hunt confirmed. 'No sane Noggy is going to be out on a night like this.'

Pope rarely showed anger. 'Sod 'em! It was going to be fun bouncing the Cadre.' He looked up. 'Another withdrawal, I suppose? Dammit, she's *comfortable* here! It's the first chance we've had to build a decent hole.'

Hunt didn't share Pope's enthusiasm. Sometimes he thought the man was really just a frustrated builder, which was his family's business. Personally Hunt hated snowholes. He never slept well in them. Always had one eye on the ceiling. It was disturbing to crash out with it four feet above your head and wake up with it nearly touching your nose.

But he did share his colleague's indignation at having to move again when their scheduled departure was just two days away.

As he drained his chocolate, a thought occurred to him.

Being on recce, neither he nor his men had any type of firearm. Miller's men on the other hand, as they were on exercise, would have weaponry equipped with blanks. An idea began to take form.

At length he said: 'Well, lads, I for one don't intend to let Volga Olga spoil our fun. We'll jump the Cadre. Then, when Dusty and his merry men are all dead, we'll have a talk to them. Maybe they'd enjoy a little mischief themselves. With double the number and some pyrotechnics, we'll stand a better chance of singeing Olga's knickers for her.'

Pope's eyes twinkled, and even the immovable Bill Mather almost smiled.

Sergeant-Major Dusty Miller pressured his right ski into a stem turn and came to a halt across the fall-line.

He thumbed up his goggles and stared through the trees at the clear valley that ran gently away towards the road.

Thank God, he thought, the morning spindrift that had created near white-out conditions was clearing. They would be able to take advantage of the valley and slide effortlessly for some three kilometres, and make up some of the time they had lost.

The faint click of ski-poles echoed through the fir trees, telling him that the first of the Cadre team had nearly caught up. They were a good bunch, but young and still a bit short on really hard skiing experience.

They'd been travelling a punishing route all through the night and now the strain was beginning to tell. Earlier Chalky Appleton, a big, cheerful black Marine from Brixton, had sprained an ankle. They'd shared out his load as best they could, but it still served to slow them up. Now they were in danger of missing the passing supply-truck shuttle on which Miller

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had planned to hitch a lift back to base. He really didn't want to call up a helicopter, which were in short supply until the main exercise began in the New Year.

Suddenly the rasp of steel edges on crusted snow filled the air as the first man swished down through the trees and drew up alongside. At minute intervals the next three arrived.

All the sinister begoggled faces turned back as they waited for Chalky. It was several minutes before the bulky figure was seen working uncertainly down the track, gathering momentum on the decline.

Miller somehow knew that fate had selected a victim. He could see the exhaustion in Chalky's posture and sense the agony caused by his ankle. Clearly the Marine had realised too late where his comrades had stopped. He tried to slow and turn too quickly. The weight of the Cyclops Roc bergan pack on his back decided to go the other way. With little strength in his injured ankle, the unfortunate Marine failed to take the bend and piled headfirst into a snowdrift.

'Aim for a tree, miss a tree,' Miller murmured with good-humoured exasperation.

But the others weren't in the mood. Chalky Appleton's spectacular 'yeti' just meant another five minutes' standing around, cooling off dangerously quickly, whilst the hapless Marine released his bergan and skis and got himself together again.

It was several long, bone-numbing minutes before they were ready to set off, now beginning the downhill run in single file. This time Marine Appleton led, his skis pointed in a wide, brake-action snowplough to prevent a hurtling runaway descent. The others fell in behind with Miller bringing up the rear. He was grinning to himself. Perhaps the mischievous mountain trolls had decided they'd had enough for one day, and would leave them alone now. This was a

gentle downhill run. No effort. The mini-exercise nearly done and Christmas only a few days away.

He wasn't sure what he heard first. It may have been Marine Appleton's cry of alarm. Or it may have been the series of thunderflash detonations that blew in fast succession across their path. Smoke and clouds of snow obliterated the slope as Appleton lost his balance and pitched forward in a heap.

The two Marines following had no room to manoeuvre. With angry curses they concertinaed into their prostrate companion. A third avoided the pile-up and slewed to a halt.

Sergeant-Major Dusty Miller performed the most spectacular kneebending Telemark turn of his life. It was the most graceful and difficult manoeuvre to master, but a joy to watch. And if he'd stopped to think, he'd never have executed it. As it was, sheer panic and instinctive reaction from years of training threw him onto automatic-pilot.

By the time he came to a stop, his rifle was ready to return fire.

His finger hesitated on the trigger. Realisation dawned that his weapon was fitted with a blank-firing mechanism. God, was this a prank or for real?

Four white-clad figures appeared from what was evidently an OP. One of them threw back his arm.

The grenade was a hurtling dark shape against the grey sky.

Instinctively Miller ducked, but too late. It exploded on his head, and he felt the tell-tale icy trickle down the back of his neck.

'A fuckin' snowball!'

Suddenly the air was full of them. Everywhere snowballs were bursting around the prone men, showering them with crystals.

'It's the bloody Regiment!' Miller bawled, driven by a

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mixed feeling of relief and anger at being turned over. 'C'mon, lads, let's show the bastards! COUNTER ATTACK!'

Hurling off bergans and skis the Cadre members launched themselves into the fray, pounding up the slope to take on the jeering ambushers. For five minutes the battle raged until all the ammunition was spent.

Miller gasped for breath, his face wet with snow and perspiration.

'Might have known it was you, Brian! You old bugger!'

Hunt grinned. 'Your face was a joy, Dusty. And that Telemark . . . Wish I'd had a camera!' He turned to the mass of bodies sprawled in the snow. 'There's a brew on, so c'mon and join us for a wet. And I expect we can rustle up something a little more festive to liven it up.'

Still chuckling Hunt turned back to Miller. 'Listen, Dusty, we're not just playing silly buggers,' he said in a low voice. 'You remember those reports about a Spets team in the area?'

It took Miller a few seconds to realise Hunt wasn't joking. 'Spetsnaz? Yes, I'd heard.'

'Well, don't look, but they're watching us now. *Really*, no kid. They've been bugging us during this whole op.'

'Is this a wind-up?'

Hunt smiled. 'Put it this way. If there *are* any photographs of your Telemark turn, you're going to have to go to Moscow to get them.' He hesitated. 'What I have in mind is to give them a little surprise. Just so they haven't had it all their own way.'

Miller nodded thoughtfully. 'You got clearance?'

The SAS man raised an eyebrow. 'Now who the hell is going to give me clearance? It's just between us and them. A deniable operation, so to speak.' He studied the veteran Marine closely. 'Thing is, can I count on you?'

Sergeant-Major Miller sniffed heavily. 'Well, we've missed the sodding truck anyway.'

They came in slowly, spread in a wide arc like beaters on a grouse shoot.

Whilst Chalky Appleton and Len Pope retained a semblance of activity at the observation post, the mixed team of seven SAS men and Cadre members had slipped one by one into the treeline at the rear. It took them an hour to gain height, taking a wide sweep around the head of the valley to a position some thousand metres behind the believed location of the Spetsnaz position.

The light was beginning to fail, swathing the snow in a fine pink mist. Exactly 1500 hours.

A sudden ferocious hiss came from the OP, shattering the brittle stillness of the valley, as the illumination flare shot skyward. For a moment the dazzling incandescent light glittered like a new-born star. Then slowly it began its descent towards the Spetsnaz hide.

Brian Hunt waved to the next man in the sweep-line. Gradually they all began moving forward carefully, but with deliberate noise. Every now and then those with rifles would discharge a blank round at the sky which was darkening to a deep ruby-coloured bloom in the west.

Another illumination flare blasted from the OP. Then another.

In Hunt's earpiece he heard Len Pope's transmission: '*Hello Red Bear this is Goldilocks. Hello Red Bear this is Goldilocks. Time to go home. Repeat. Time to go home. Please acknowledge. Over.*'

The sweep continued at a slow, methodical pace for some thirty minutes until the line came to a halt amongst the fir and ash trees on the opposite side of the valley to the OP.

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Of course 'Red Bear' never had acknowledged, but fifteen minutes earlier Len Pope reported some movement from Volga Olga's suspected position.

Hunt was taking no chances now. As pre-arranged he waved to Dusty Miller, Bill Mather and Big Joe Monk to advance with him whilst the less experienced men waited in support. Carefully he skied between the tree trunks until he could see the shallow depression which was rutted with disturbed snow. He released his bindings and approached on foot.

After several messy scrambles through deep snow from one tree trunk to another, he had a clear view of the site. It was deserted. Behind it a snowdrift had been collapsed where a well-prepared hole had evidently been dug.

'Okay, Brian!' Miller called from the opposite side of the site. 'They're gone. There's fresh tracks here. Going like the clappers.'

Bill Mather and Big Joe Monk appeared from the trees, sliding down through the remains of the snowhole.

Hunt joined Miller who was studying the ski tracks.

The Marine said: 'You know, Brian, I still half-thought you were taking the piss. I didn't really expect to find anything here.'

Hunt knelt down. 'One of these ski-tracks is definitely *much* lighter than the others. And these boot prints. Smaller and closer together. See how the toes are turned slightly inwards.'

'Meaning?' Monk asked.

Hunt looked up and grinned. 'It means that maybe Volga Olga isn't just the creation of some randy, homesick soldier. Maybe she does really exist.'

Monk smiled broadly; it was clear what he was thinking.

'Hey! Look what I've found!' It was Mather. He'd discovered something hanging from a webbing strap in a tree.

'Careful!' Hunt snapped. 'It may be . . .'

'No problem, boss,' Mather replied easily. He already had the cap off the flask. He sniffed it cautiously. 'Vodka. Peppered vodka.'

Hunt frowned. 'You sure?'

'And it's for you.'

'What?' Hunt took the flask and the scrap of notepaper that had been tucked into the webbing. The writing was uneven and the ink had run. The letters had an oddly Cyrillic shape to them. *Happy New Year, Brian*.

Miller flashed a suspicious glance at Bill Mather, but instantly realised he wasn't the type given to practical jokes.

Hunt shook his head slowly. 'How in hell did they know my name?'

There was a stunned silence. Then Miller said: 'I went to this lecture last summer. Some wallah from Intelligence. He reckoned the Soviets work on building a file on every special forces bloke they can. Cadre, SAS, SBS and the like. Follow their careers in Forces' journals, etc. Try and find out where they live.'

Hunt felt suddenly cold. 'That's not the same as matching faces.'

Miller shrugged. 'No, Brian, not your face. Your Morse transmission. You know everyone's got their own pattern, like a fingerprint. Individual. Their HQ can probably identify each man in your team by his Morse.'

Hunt held the Marine's gaze for several seconds. The very thought of it made his flesh crawl. At last he said: 'It's time to go.'

The night was bright with stars and icily cold as the snake of skiers wound its heavily laden way down into the valley. A wind was picking up now, moaning through the mountains

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and polishing the surface of the snow until it gleamed.

Scarcely had the vacating soldiers disappeared from view than a shadow detached itself from the darkness of the treeline.

Nimbly the figure skied through the bushes until it reached the crushed remnants of the observation post. Seconds later the first figure was joined by another. Then another, and then one more.

Without exchanging a word, two of them took up defensive positions, their Kalashnikov AKS-74 assault rifles at the ready. The other two began a careful rummage through the snow debris for anything that might have been left behind.

There turned out to be only one item, and it had been easy to find. It had been deliberately hung from a branch.

Beneath her *ushanka* fur pile hat and above her ski mask, only Valia Mikhailovitch's eyes showed. They were a rich hazel colour and they smarted with the cold as she lifted her goggles. But they showed the hint of a smile as she turned over the returned flask in her hand.

As she unstopped it she was aware that the smell of vodka had gone. The flask was full of Scotch whisky.

There was no written message. But obviously Sergeant-Major Brian Hunt of the SAS had a sense of humour.

One

When Nikolai Shalayez saw the train standing at Tbilisi station, he felt suddenly like a bird set free.

He shuffled his feet as he waited impatiently for his friend, and glanced nervously towards the line of green coaches with their cream livery stripes. Already the expectant thrum from the engine filled the air as the few remaining passengers climbed aboard. The last call had already been tannoyed.

It was with profound relief that he saw his friend finally extricate himself from the throng around the ticket office.

‘Sorry, Niki!’ Sergei Chagall gasped, struggling with his heavy leather valise. The flapping grey greatcoat, which had been so necessary when they’d left central Asia, was now a burden in the mild southern climate of Georgia.

‘We’re the last ones,’ Nikolai Shalayez replied. ‘We’d better move.’

‘It was chaos back there,’ Chagall explained. The perspiration was dripping from his forehead as he attempted to keep pace with Shalayez. ‘They are two de luxe carriages short and there’s a party of *nomenklatura* from Moscow insisting they have the seats.’

Nikolai Shalayez raised his eyebrows. Typical! Senior officials of the Communist Party were a pain in the arse wherever they went. Always demanding the best seats in restaurants and theatres, getting special hospitals, and prized foreign imports that the working masses scarcely knew existed.

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'Then it is our good luck that you have the red pass,' Shalayez grinned. 'What would we do without it!'

'This carriage,' Chagall indicated. 'It's only first-class, I'm afraid. Even a KGB colonel is humbled by the massed might of our political masters. As it is, I expect we'll have to turf out some poor unsuspecting peasants.'

And, after the high climb up into the carriage, Chagall's prediction proved correct. Adopting his unsmiling official face, the KGB officer flashed his red pass with its gold star and informed the four occupants, students with well-connected parents on their way to a recreation camp on the Black Sea, that the compartment was being commandeered for an official party.

Their protests were met by Chagall's glinting eyes and a quiet firm voice that hardly rose above a whisper. 'And would you like me to enquire from where you obtained those jeans? Or that T-shirt?'

Hastily the students' gangling leader covered up the *US Marines Rule. Okay?* slogan emblazoned across his chest. Shalayez noticed that his denims were not the despised Dzhinsky brand, but a pair of Levi 501s, much prized in the new youth culture.

Sheepishly the teenager led his comrade students out into the corridor. The last thing he wanted to do was explain how he'd stopped an American tourist on the streets of Leningrad and offered a ludicrous price to buy the shirt off his back.

As the door slid closed, Chagall humped his valise onto the blue plastic seat and roared with laughter. 'So much for student power, eh!'

The train started with a jolt and Shalayez half-fell into the seat by the window. He was a tall man with piercing violet eyes and strong lean features. Almost handsome had it not

been for the unruly black mane of hair that always looked in need of a pair of scissors – or at least a brush. He shared the same age as his friend – forty-one years – and the same humble village origins. That was really why they'd become friends in the first place, three years ago. Then they discovered that they shared the same sense of boyish humour and mischief – rare qualities for both a mathematical scientist and a KGB officer.

Nikolai Shalavez, however, could never quite accept Chagall's casual abuse of his rank and privilege. 'You were a bit hard on them, Sergei. We didn't need all four bunks.'

Thankfully, Chagall removed his heavy coat. 'Didn't you see those two beauties in the next compartment?'

Shalavez shook his head.

'Acute observation is one of the more useful tricks they teach us in the Department.' Chagall grinned wickedly. 'We'll be thankful for our privacy before we reach Sochi. Mark my words, Niki, they were two juicy young fruits. And we'll have them plucked before the night is out. After months of enforced celibacy at that godforsaken camp, it can become a habit.' He pulled a dumb expression. 'I do believe I've forgotten what it's for!'

The lightness of his friend's mood got through. 'That's not what I heard, Sergei!'

'And what was that?'

'That you weren't using it for digging up mushrooms, that's what.' He raised one eyebrow. 'That little flower from Wologda who works in the canteen?'

A satisfied smirk spread over Chagall's face. The alcoholic glow of his full cheeks, when combined with the boyish brown curls of his head, was easily mistaken for the bloom of youth, and took years off his age. 'Rumours, my dear friend, can get you into trouble. Leave rumours to the KGB – we're better

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at it!' He laughed infectiously at his own joke. 'I shall now see the lie of the land with those two beauties next door. I'll get us some tea from the conductor.' He dug in his pocket and pulled out an empty hand. 'Damn, no change. Don't have sixteen kopecks on you, perchance?'

Shalavez shook his head as he reached into his own pocket. Sergei Chagall really was incorrigible! He handed over the coins and watched as his friend disappeared into the corridor.

Left alone, his gaze shifted back to the vista of Georgian mountains that were rolling by with gathering speed. How green and warm and inviting they looked, even in winter.

He had grown to love them; it hadn't been an instant thing. Like most Russians, he scorned the easy-going and independent people of Georgia with their Mediterranean ways. Like everyone else he'd been brought up on jokes about the country bumpkins from Georgia. The hillbillies. Their gentle climate and all that sun addled their brains! Not like the crisp cold of Russia that kept the mind sharp to concentrate on more serious matters. Georgia was a place for rest and recreation – only good for the annual vacation.

But all that had been before he'd met Katya.

When he closed his eyes he could picture her without difficulty. In fact, she'd changed little during the ten years they had been married. The same almond face framed in straight ash blonde hair, although it had a few silver threads now. Unusual colouring that, for a Georgian girl. She must have got it from her late father who had been a waterways engineer from Moscow. He had met Katya's mother in Tbilisi. And Katya had her eyes. Large liquid brown eyes that showed every emotion she was feeling. They would tell it all. Joy, concern, curiosity, hurt.

Nikolai Shalavez was no longer registering the passing

scenery. Hurt. That was the look he'd been seeing lately. Of course, she'd said nothing, it wasn't her way. But then with those eyes she didn't have to.

The carriage wheels clanked noisily as the train slowed. Shalayez cursed. He'd forgotten how interminably long the journey to Sochi on the Black Sea coast could be. It was a single track with only occasional passing points. So inevitably time would drag as they sat on a side-track, waiting for a late train coming up from the south before the journey could continue.

He forced himself to relax. It wasn't easy. Every second's delay would make his eventual reunion with Katya more traumatic.

Already he was a day late. He and his wife should have been travelling down together to Sochi twenty-four hours earlier. But his journey from the high-security compound at Sary Shagan in central Asia had been delayed. Fog had rolled in off the vast Osero Balchasch lake and grounded the Illyushin jumbo jet. For eight hours it sat like a fat impotent slug.

So when he eventually reached Tbilisi he found their flat deserted and a message from Katya to say she'd gone on without him. There were no rail coupons available for days.

A brilliant finish to a brilliant three years, Niki thought bitterly.

For three years he had been a virtual prisoner at Sary Shagan, working all the hours God gave. In all that time he'd only been granted leave for a few days each New Year and a week each summer. And this year even that had been withheld. It was hardly enough to sustain a marriage.

Such was the importance of the Sary Shagan project to the Motherland – according to his officious masters. Development, they said, had reached a critical stage. Especially

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so, given the stand the American president had taken on his 'Star Wars' defence policy. But now, at last, Nikolai Shalayez's role in the project was virtually complete.

He may have been there still though, had it not been for Sergei Chagall. Dear Sergei! It had been he who had used his influence as the camp's security chief to get him released from the project. Even then it had cost a crate of vodka to persuade the camp's hard-bitten bastard of a welfare psychologist that one of their most brilliant mathematical scientists was in imminent danger of a complete mental breakdown, if he was not reunited with his wife.

Dear Sergei! How would he have coped with those three years of purgatory without his companionship and cynical good humour? It was Chagall who had freed him. And again it was he who had worked wonders in getting seats on the train.

But when they finally reached the holiday chalet at Sochi, he was well aware that it would be down to him alone to save his marriage. That was one area in which even the resourceful Sergei could wield little influence.

The train began to move again. And he thought back to the year before when he had last seen his wife. Going to bed with her had been like going to bed with a total stranger. Tense, fumbling. It had not been successful. They were only just starting to get to know each other again, when it had been time for him to return to the project.

And as for little Yelina . . . Well, she had shown little interest in her father. If anything she appeared to resent his presence, becoming sullen and withdrawn. And how could he blame a child for that when her father only ever bothered to show himself at New Year and for a few days' mushroom picking in the summer.

His thoughts were disturbed as the door slid open with a crash. Chagall stood there beaming triumphantly, an arm around the shoulders of two timid-looking girls in their teens.

‘Look what I’ve found, Niki!’

‘I thought you were going for some tea?’ Shalayez chided.

‘Bah, the samovar’s not boiled yet,’ Chagall retorted with mild irritation. ‘Besides, plenty of time for tea later. You should meet Anna and Sophia. Would you believe they are drama students? What a coincidence!’

Coincidence? Shalayez didn’t follow. But by now he was used to his friend’s sudden brilliant ruses. He found himself appraising the young girls. There were few females at Sary Shagan.

They were pretty enough. Slim young things with wide innocent eyes. Anna was auburn with a peppering of freckles on her face. Sophia was black-haired and looked the more wary of the two.

The girl called Anna stepped forward and offered her hand. ‘I am so pleased to meet you. I’ve always wanted to be in films.’

He could feel the fine bones of her hand in his.

‘Films?’

The girl’s eyes were bright with eagerness. ‘I think it’s such a clever idea to go for complete unknowns. It will make your movie so much more real.’

He looked up at Chagall for an explanation. His friend’s face was straight as he hugged Sophia with rather more than fatherly comfort. ‘Yes, Niki, I have told them how we film producers are always on the lookout for fresh new talent. New faces.’

Shalayez’s mouth dropped. Chagall had done it again. But the protest died on his lips as he found the girl Anna staring

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at him curiously. He had to admit she was a beauty. Her eyes were green and bright, and her skin glowed with the translucent health of adolescence.

Even as his eyes fixed on her moist pink mouth, her lips drew back to form a shy smile. Small, even white teeth bit nervously on her lower lip. 'I'd do anything to be in your film. Truly.'

Dawn found the train stationary on a passing track for yet another interminably long wait.

Nikolai Shalayez had gone to the end of the carriage which was the only place where passengers were allowed to smoke. The acrid bite of the day's first cigarette tasted good, and lightened his mood. It wasn't that he hadn't enjoyed making love with young Anna to the rhythmic motion of the train, because he had. After almost a year of enforced celibacy her exuberance and willingness to experiment had been like a fresh breeze on a spring day after the long dark days of winter.

But he had hated the deception. Sergei's story that they were film-producers seemed to him such an obvious confidence trick that he was amazed that the girls had been gullible enough to fall for it.

For his part he felt ashamed that he had said nothing to put them right. Ashamed that he'd had to ask his friend for a two-kopek *galosh*. And ashamed that he'd deceived Katya. That he had gone and spent the passion he'd been saving for his wife.

He wiped the condensation from the window and peered out. The train had stopped opposite one of the giant bathing stations that disfigured this popular area of the Black Sea coast. Beyond the ugly concrete structures the water was a polished silver plate, blinding in the reflection of the low-angled sun.

Not long now, he thought. Soon the train would creak forward again and the other passengers would begin to stir. Before lunch they would be shunting into the resort town of Sochi, with its hotels and sanatoria at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains. To where he would find Katya and little Yelina waiting for him.

From now on, Shalayez vowed, he would make it all up to them. Now that his work at Sary Shagan was over, everything would be different. Perhaps he might even get that post in Moscow he wanted. He was well aware that his work on the project had earned him renewed respect in Soviet scientific circles, and that could open up many doors and opportunities . . .

That reminded him. He delved in his pocket and extracted a crumpled white envelope with its Swedish postmark. Carefully he pulled out the contents and examined the letterhead.

It was from the Rönkä Society in Stockholm – an independent Finnish-owned international study centre for the furtherance of mathematics and computer science. To the man-in-the-street it was unknown, but to computer scientists the world over it had, since its inception in the seventies, earned a reputation as one of the most respected seats of learning for the discipline.

He smiled wryly. How strange to think that they knew of him. That his earlier theses published in various Soviet scientific journals had been reproduced around the globe. That he, Nikolai Shalayez, was revered by thousands who had never attended one of his lectures, let alone spoken a word of Russian.

What, he wondered, would his fellow mathematicians have thought if they'd seen him with Anna last night?

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'Planning to leave us, Niki?'

He jumped at the sound of Sergei Chagall's voice as his friend pushed open the door with his foot. He was carrying two glasses of tea.

'I was deep in thought, you startled me,' he laughed. He took one of the glass-holders. 'What did you mean?'

Chagall sipped absently and peered out at the sea. 'The invitation to lecture at that Swedish place.'

'How do you know about that?'

His friend grinned reassuringly. 'Niki, as security chief at Sary Shagan, it is my duty to know about such things.'

Shalavez felt suddenly annoyed. 'You mean you opened it? Read it?'

Chagall rubbed a larger patch in the condensation on the window. 'What a beautiful day.' He swallowed more tea before adding: 'All mail received by people working on the project is screened by my security staff, Niki. It is the rules. Friends or not, I cannot make exceptions. Especially letters from abroad.'

'I see.' But he didn't sound as though he did.

'And are you going to go?'

'I'd like to visit Sweden. It would be a good break for Katya and Yelina, too.'

Chagall smiled. 'May I borrow one of your cigarettes? I'm out.'

Shalavez rummaged in his pocket. 'Sure.'

The KGB colonel lit it and blew out a slow steady stream of smoke which burst over the window. 'They'd never let you go, Niki, you must realise that?'

'I hadn't thought . . .'

'Not a whole family. Not someone as important as you. And now you've been working on the project, even you might find it difficult to get permission.'

Shalayez shrugged easily. 'So I won't go.'

The other man turned his head to face him. 'So I do not have a traitor on my hands? What the West calls a 'defector'?'

The laugh was genuine. 'Of course not! I'd love to go to the Society and talk with fellow mathematicians. Exchange ideas. It would be stimulating – you can only get so much from fellow scientists in your own country. And I'd love Katya and Yelina to see another country –' He paused – But, why should I want to 'defect'? I love my wife, I love my work, and I love my country.'

Chagall nodded sagely. 'And all the bureaucratic restrictions you have here . . .?'

Shalayez smiled knowingly. 'Things were hard on the project, I admit. But that is different now. Science is one area where the bureaucrats have a hard time. How can you bind up something as ethereal as mathematics in red tape? First they have to understand.' Again he laughed and realised that, finally, his despondency at having been incarcerated on the project was at last lifting. 'Besides, I've been a Party member all my life and now my career is reaching new heights. I have much to look forward to.'

Chagall's face was suddenly grim-set. It was almost the official face he used at his work. Except for his eyes. They were sad and serious. 'Then you are lucky, Niki. In my line – bureaucracy knows no bounds. The Party understands *my* type of work all too well.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'I will tell you something, Niki. Something I have never told anyone before. And I only tell you because you are my trusted friend.' He brought his head closer until Niki was aware of the pores on his skin and the bristles on his jowls waiting for the morning blade. 'I would "defect" tomorrow if I had the chance.'

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Shalayez felt distinctly uncomfortable. He was aware that this was dangerous talk. He tried to make light of it. 'But *you're* not married, Sergei. As you said yourself, if I went abroad I wouldn't be allowed to go with Katya. And I couldn't – wouldn't leave her.'

Chagall's mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. 'I was married once, Niki, a long time ago. I became another divorce statistic. Like so many others, my wife only married me to get out of her parents' house. So the State would give us a flat of our own.' There was venom in his words; it was not a side of his character that Shalayez had witnessed before. 'What is the lust of some woman compared with a man's freedom, eh? Tell me that.'

'I love Katya.'

Chagall's brown eyes were only inches from his own.

'Is that so? And did my eyes deceive me last night when you were thrashing around with a little nymph who was young enough to be your daughter?'

Shalayez swallowed; he couldn't think of a reply.

'Men are different,' Chagall continued in a low growl. 'Freedom is what they need. Freedom of choice and action. It is fresh air, bread and water to them. Any hot-blooded male can find the comfort of a woman – anywhere in the world. Not so freedom.'

'What are you saying, Sergei?'

The KGB colonel grunted. 'Just that I've seen more of the world than you, my friend. I've seen France and West Germany. And Britain. Even Sweden. A lovely place that. You stay there for a week – no, a day – and you'll understand what I mean. You're so used to life here, so used to coping with it – getting around problems, making up shortages on the black market – you don't even begin to *conceive* of how it can be in the West.'

He paused. 'I tell you, Niki, we are a Third World country whose only claim to anything else is our military might and our missiles.'

In a small voice Shalayez said: 'I don't like to hear you talk like this, Sergei.'

Chagall raised a heavy eyebrow. 'Does the truth hurt so much to hear? Lift your eyes above your confounded books of algebra for five minutes, Niki, and look beyond your nose! With your assets, the West would welcome you with open arms. You'd be free to research at any university in the world, on any subject you wished, and name your own price!'

The train started with a jolt, its sudden momentum pushing the two men together. For a second Shalayez clutched at his friend's lapel to prevent himself from falling. It was becoming claustrophobic in the smoky confines of the end-of-carriage section. He wanted to get out, but he was intrigued. There was one question he wanted to ask. 'Sergei?'

'Yes?'

'Is that what you are recommending I do?'

Chagall's grin was back to its usual mischievous self. He was like a different man. 'No, my dear Niki. I am just saying what I should like to do if I were you. But, as you point out, you have a loving wife, a sweet daughter, and a blooming career.' He hesitated. 'In fact, I have some news for you on that score.' It was suddenly as though his friend had never given the confidence; that it had been a figment of his imagination.

'News?'

Chagall placed a brotherly arm around his shoulder. 'You remember you said how you'd like a research post and an apartment in Moscow?'

'Of course. Even mathematicians are given to occasional dreams.'

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Chagall shook his head. 'Not just dreams, Niki. Even our slow-moving system recognises great achievement. Eventually.'

'My achievements are not that great, Sergei.' Shalayez pulled a bitter smile. 'And I'm afraid I do not have many influential friends.'

'Maybe not. But *I* do.' The KGB colonel laughed aloud at his friend's pessimism. 'You underestimate yourself, Niki.'

'What are you trying to tell me?'

Chagall grinned smugly. 'That you have been offered a post at Moscow University, and a very handsome apartment has been allotted to you and Katya on Mira Prospekt.'

Shalayez stared, incredulous. 'You have arranged this?'

'I do have a certain amount of *blat*,' Chagall admitted modestly. 'I just put a word in the right ears.'

'I do not know what to say!' He was beside himself with amazement and happiness. 'Just wait until Katya hears about this.'

Chagall basked in his friend's joy. 'She deserves it after all she's put up with. You both do.'

Katya Shalayeza admired the smart wooden chalet.

It nestled with others in the pine groves of a holiday complex overlooking the Black Sea on the outskirts of Sochi. Only a few were in use at this time of year, mostly allocated to specially privileged people, and the old *babushka* who opened up for them made it clear that she did not expect to be at their beck and call. She was also acutely suspicious that there was no man with the woman and her daughter.

'And you should wrap that child up properly,' was her scolding parting shot. 'This may be a resort but it is still December. Her poor knees are blue.'

The door slammed leaving Katya and Yelina staring at each

other in amazement. Then mother and daughter saw the funny side of it.

Yelina poked her tongue out at the door. 'Old busybody.'

Her mother smiled, and unfastened her headscarf. 'She means well.'

The nine-year-old wrinkled her nose. It was a pretty, pert nose just like her mother's. 'She's nosey and bossy like every *babushka*. Don't they remember what it's like to be young? Don't they know we don't feel the cold as they do?'

Katya smiled. 'Well, maybe you don't, but this chalet isn't very warm.'

'I hope you won't be like her one day.'

Her mother's eyes settled on the electric fire. 'These huts are really for the summer. I don't suppose they need heating then.' She knelt down and examined the appliance. She could see that the fragile wire at the end of the element had fractured. 'This is no good. We'll have to use the oven to heat the place.'

Yelina wasn't impressed. 'Just like home.'

'Not quite. At home we have food. I've only a small loaf and a jar of pickled herring left over from the journey. That's all until the shops open tomorrow.'

'You could ask the old woman. I bet she's got plenty of provisions in her larder. Look at the size of her.'

Katya smiled and hugged her coat around her. 'I don't think so, do you? I can imagine the reception I'd get. And I can just imagine the roubles clocking up in her eyes like a cartoon character!'

Her daughter giggled, then sighed: 'I wish father was here. She wouldn't dare say no to him. Not an important scientist.'

Katya paled a little, but tried not to let the hurt show. Nevertheless her voice was terse when she spoke. 'Well, little

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mother, he's not here, is he? Just like he's hardly been here for the last three years.'

Yelina pulled a face. 'But he *promised* he'd be here in his letter.'

'I know, I know,' Katya replied. She stood by the window and stared out at the failing sunlight dappling the pine groves and spreading a stain of shimmering gold over the sea beyond. Like the night shadows she felt her own fears closing in on her. 'But he had to come a long way, and the weather can be bad in the east. I expect that's what held him up. So you'll have to put up with just me for a day or two more.' She looked down at her daughter and smiled. 'Now go and make up your bed, there's a good girl.'

Yelina looked curiously at her mother, her head tilted to one side. 'You *do* still love father, don't you?'

The challenge took Katya aback. It was so unexpected. Yet how could she expect to hide what had happened from her daughter who was so bright and observant? 'I love Niki Shalavez as much as ever, and well you know it. Now, go and make your bed.'

Yelina was happier now. As she walked lightly towards her bedroom, her mother turned back to the window. In just a few minutes it had become much darker outside. As the fiery sky was quenched by the sea she could see her own reflection in the glass and, momentarily, she imagined she could see the strong, dark features of her lover standing behind her. She shut her eyes and could feel his warm, slightly smoky breath on the back of her neck. His hands on her hips, feel him pressing against her buttocks.

She opened her eyes. He was gone. Hans was gone, and she prayed to God that he would never return. At their last meeting he said he would go back to Leipzig if she was ending their affair. She hoped that he meant it. With him gone she

knew that she could cope. In time, she would force him from her mind, until the memory of his very existence became as faded as an old sepia snapshot from the family album. Dutifully she would work at rebuilding her life and her love with Niki. She had loved him since her teens and he had never done anything that hadn't endeared him to her. Only his work had forced itself between them. Now he was coming back. To stay. It would be different.

Outside it was dark. She felt unaccountably cold. Her heart fluttered and she felt scared. Because, although she was reluctant to admit it, she knew that if Hans should ever walk up to the jewellery counter where she worked, it would start all over again. Their passion had erupted out of nothing, like a forest fire. An explosion of body chemicals. It had recklessly consumed them both, until she was hurtling totally out of control towards emotional disaster.

The knock on the door made her start.

Katya turned. No doubt it was the *babushka* back to complain about something. Or maybe to offer a working electric fire for a small bribe. Gathering her composure, she crossed the linoleum floor and readied herself to stand her ground. She flung the door open.

She was not prepared for the man in the black coat and trilby hat. Although he was no taller than she, his stocky frame seemed to fill the doorway with its dark presence.

'Comrade Shalayeza?'

She gulped. No words came. Malevolent eyes glinted from a swarthy face. The light behind her picked up the tiny droplets of perspiration glistening above his upper lip.

'Comrade Katya Shalayeza?' She was mesmerised by the snap of the words spoken through crooked teeth. His breath smelled of peppermint.

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Saliva trickled into her throat and she found her tongue.
'Yes. What is it?'

A red card flashed briefly in his hand before he returned it to his overcoat pocket. 'Lieutenant Tatlin, KGB. This is official business.'

'Oh.' For a moment she was flummoxed. Then a thought struck her. 'My husband? Is it about Niki? Has something happened?'

Tatlin didn't smile. 'Nothing has happened to your husband. I should be obliged if you would come with me. It won't take long.' It was very politely said, but the man's terse tone did not invite contradiction.

'Who is it?' Yelina's voice came from the bedroom.

Tatlin peered over Katya's shoulder at the child. 'Your daughter, I believe?' The woman nodded, uneasy. 'It's all right, little one, I just have to speak to your mother. Alone. It won't take long. We have an official chalet on the complex. Just a few minutes' walk.'

'But —'

'She'll be safe here. The *babushka* will keep an eye on your chalet until we return.'

Katya Shalayeza was still trying to reassure her daughter as Tatlin's large hand gripped her bicep and propelled her through the doorway. He did not speak as he steered her firmly along the flagged pathway that ran between the chalets. She was petrified at the suddenness of her abduction. Never before had she had such an encounter. The only KGB man she had ever met had been jovial Sergei Chagall, Niki's friend. But rumours of what happened to people in the hands of the organisation were well known to all Soviet citizens. The very mention of the name was enough to instil panic.

She told herself not to be irrational. She had done nothing

wrong. There was nothing to be afraid of. Whatever this was about, she knew she had done nothing wrong. Perhaps there was some error on the pass they'd issued for her and Yelina to leave Tbilisi . . .? Some bureaucratic slip-up. Yes, that would be it. Hadn't the man assured her that she would return in a short while?

The air was distinctly chill now and she breathed it deeply to help calm herself. They passed the *babushka* on the path and the old woman stepped aside, scowling suspiciously. Katya raised her chin defiantly.

'In here, Comrade Shalayeza,' Tatlin said suddenly.

The cabin was no different from her own. Sparsely furnished, the only obvious additions were a telephone and television.

Tatlin closed the door and indicated the uncomfortable looking settee. 'Sit down.'

Katya obeyed. 'I really don't . . .'

For the first time something resembling a smile crossed the man's face. 'No, Comrade Shalayeza, I don't suppose you do.'

Puzzlement creased her forehead. 'What do you want with me? I've all the right papers to leave Tbilisi.'

He leaned back against the door and folded his arms across his chest. 'Ah, yes. Tbilisi. And in Tbilisi did you know a certain Hans Hellmich?'

The sudden silence in the small chalet was stunning.

Instantly Katya felt her cheeks colouring. A thousand and one questions begged answering. How did this KGB man know? Anyway, what did it matter? She could think of no reason, but still she sensed she was somehow in deep trouble.

On impulse she blurted: 'No, Comrade.'

'Tatlin,' the man said easily. 'Comrade Lieutenant Tatlin.'

'I don't know him.'

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The hint of a smile died on the man's face. There was no outward sign now that he was enjoying the cat-and-mouse game of interrogation. No hint that he held all the cards. That he knew all about the woman's affair with Hellmich. That it had been he himself who had selected the handsome East German actor to play the role of Katya Shalayeza's seducer. Or that Hellmich had been the last of three prospective lovers they had needed to plant in her life before she eventually took the bait. Before they could start to roll the hidden cameras.

All these things Tatlin kept to himself. Instead he warned tersely: 'Think very carefully before you repeat your denial.'

'I said I don't -'

'*Carefully*,' Tatlin hissed. 'Lying to the KGB can get you into a lot of trouble.'

Pleading brown eyes looked up at him; her mouth was slack with bewilderment.

'And Flat 10, 33 Besiki Street? Have you ever been there?'

'No.' Her voice had faded. She cleared her throat. 'I don't think so.'

'You don't think so?'

She hesitated. 'I don't think so. I don't remember.'

Tatlin nodded sagely. 'The *dezhurnaya* at 33 Besiki Street remembers you, Comrade Shalayeza.'

Damn, she would. Katya recalled the old crone in the ground-floor flat and the creak of the front door whenever she had crept past. And for a couple of roubles she'd remember or forget anything you asked – until a higher bidder came along.

Katya thought fast. 'I think I may have delivered something there once or twice. The customers who called at my shop.'

'Is it usual to deliver jewellery?'

She saw a glimmer of hope. 'Sometimes, Comrade Tatlin. If it's been ordered. When it comes in I might take it round to the customer's address.'

The man stopped leaning against the door. 'I am sure such enthusiasm for work would win high praise from General Secretary Gorbachev. But shall we stop playing games? I'm sure you want to get back to little Yelina.'

God, he even knew her daughter's name! How did he know so much?

Tatlin said: 'You have been having a secret liaison with an East German national. One Hans Hellmich. We have the evidence, so do you really want to persist with your denial?'

Her heart was hammering in her chest. Tears of fear began to pulse from her eyes. 'Have – have I done wrong?'

Slut, Tatlin thought contemptuously. 'Morally, that is not for me to say. But Hans Hellmich is believed to have been recruited by West German Intelligence as a spy.'

Her eyes widened. 'But he's a construction worker ...'

Tatlin sneered. 'Even construction workers have been known to spy. He was recruited in East Berlin.'

Katya couldn't, wouldn't believe it. Not Hans. 'He comes from Leipzig.'

The KGB man gave a snort of disgust. She was more stupid than he thought. 'He worked on a site in East Berlin two years ago. He was recruited then.'

The room was closing in around her. This was a nightmare. It made no sense. Her face was full of anguish as she looked up. 'Even if this is true, Comrade Tatlin – what would a spy want with me . . . ?'

No answer came. All Katya heard was her own question ringing in her ears. Then she heard herself say: 'Niki, oh my God.' Her voice trailed away.

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'You have answered your own question. Your husband Nikolai Shalayez is an important Soviet scientist and mathematician. He is engaged on sensitive work.'

Katya shook her head vehemently. 'But I know nothing of his work. I couldn't tell Hans anything even if I'd wanted to.'

For the first time Tatlin removed his trilby hat. His hair was black and thin, strands of it combed across to hide his balding head. 'I believe you, Comrade Shalayeza. But ask yourself this: How would it look on the security report of your husband's file?'

Her mouth dropped.

'I will tell you. If word of this got out, it is possible that you would be sent to trial for complicity in treason. You would probably serve in a labour camp on the other side of the Urals. If you were lucky, in view of the questionable morality of your liaison, you might be sent for corrective treatment in a psychiatric clinic.'

He watched with gratification as her lips curled in horror at his prediction. 'As for your husband, what happened to him would be certain. He would be removed from the list of privileged scientists. He would no longer work on sensitive projects, or be allowed any senior teaching post. His loss of status would mean no housing priority or admission to special shops. The State and the Party would be obliged to treat him as a social leper. Your daughter would not be considered for any special schools. *That* is what would happen if your affair with this Hans Hellmich reached his security file.'

Katya stared gloomily at the floor as she felt the waves of shame flood over her. Slowly, she looked up. 'You said *if*. You said *if* it reached his file.'

Tatlin held her gaze with deadpan eyes. 'You are a lucky woman, Comrade Shalayeza. You are a lucky woman because

we found out about this early enough, and because your husband has friends.'

'Friends?' She didn't understand.

'I am acting on instructions from Comrade Colonel Sergei Chagall.'

'Sergei?' It was all moving too fast for her.

'Colonel Chagall is responsible for the security screening of all personnel working on your husband's project. Luckily it was to him that this information was first passed. If we are careful it need go no further.'

For a moment Katya felt her heart lighten. Go no further? Oh, God, if only that was possible! Please, please, God, let that be so. 'I'll do anything,' she breathed.

Tatlin nodded. 'That is good. Because we must take precautions. If ever this gets out we must be able to say *why* we did not take it further.'

Katya frowned. 'What sort of precautions, Comrade Tatlin?'

'You must leave your husband.'

'What?' She was incredulous.

Tatlin smirked. 'Are you hard of hearing? You must leave your husband. That way we can claim that the security threat has been neutralised and therefore we considered any additional action against you unbeneficial to the State.'

'Never! Leave Niki?' She stared at Tatlin as though he was mad. 'I've been waiting for three years to be back with him again. If he hadn't been away I'd never have got involved with Hans in the first place.'

'Exactly,' the man said as though she had just made the point for him. 'My understanding is that your relationship with your husband is at a low ebb anyway. So it should not be difficult for you to go before you get fond of each other again. You can take your daughter. Go to another city, far away.'

THAT LAST MOUNTAIN

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We thought perhaps Berezniki. We'll fix you up with a good job and a nice flat.'

'Berezniki? That's miles away . . .'

'That's the idea,' Tatlin said with a sneer.

'I won't do it.' Defiant.

Tatlin nodded slowly, then ambled across the room to the television set. 'Well, if you won't do it, Comrade Shalayeza, I am afraid we will have to. We will have to tell your husband and make sure that he never wants to see *you* again.'

Katya felt angry and defensive. 'Niki wouldn't believe you. I hardly believe what I did myself.'

'And with Hans Hellmich to testify to your affair?'

'It would be my word against his!' Katya snarled.

Tatlin reached down to a black box set beneath the television and pressed the button to start the tape. Quietly he said: 'Not quite, Comrade. Not quite.'

The television flickered into life. Katya found her eyes drawn to the screen.

As the fuzzy image settled down, she was horrified to recognise a close-shot of her own face, her mouth wide and eager to take the engorged penis in front of her.

She felt sick with shame. Then suddenly, with startling clarity she saw her whole future spanning the years ahead, a bleak vision of friendless isolation, poverty and desperate unending loneliness.