

SIBERIA

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SIBERIA (An Eastern European trilogy, Part I)

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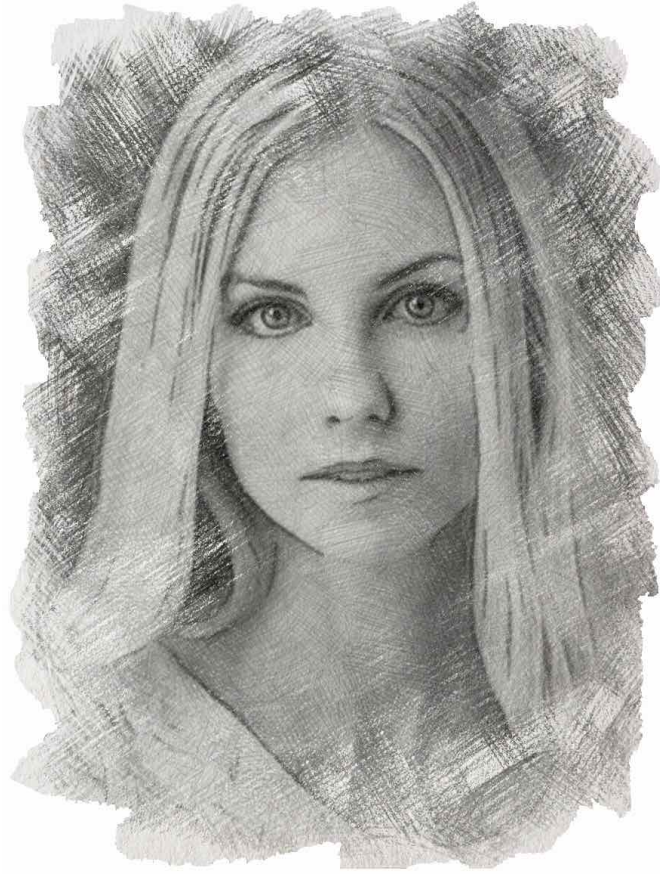
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MARIA NIKOLAYEVNA IVANOVA

“Fear is like faith. You either have it, or you don’t...
And I’m a non-believer.”

PROLOGUE

*NOVOAZOVSK
DONETSK OBLAST, UKRAINE
Tuesday, July 15, 2014*

The small forest next to the Russian frontier painted a dismal and lugubrious landscape. The black night covered everything with a mantle of silky rayon, while softly blowing a few clouds southward. A perched owl on top of an oak tree kept a close watch for slightest movement in the thin grass that would pinpoint its dinner. A small wild boar rattled the bushes on the edge of the grove while in the distance, a sound —faint at first— was slowly but steadily approaching. It became increasingly louder. The owl took off for shelter furiously shaking the brushwood, forcing it to come to life. Over the dense, green field, a powerful, metal giant descended like a violent spirit from the skies. At about ten meters off the ground, its eyes illuminated intensely and launched its blinding beams over a small clearing. At four meters the powerful Kamov deadlocked, oscillating from side to side, delivering what looked like a deadly Dantesque waltz. The helicopter door opened letting out three male and two female assault troop soldiers who quickly took refuge in the trees. From their headquarters in Krasnodar Krai, one of the Russian Federation's administrative regions in northern Caucasia located east of Ukraine and next door to the disputed territory of Crimea and Sebastopol, the small troop arrived for a high-impact operation. The sergeant in charge of the group, veteran Aleksey Serkin, made a signal to regroup as he watched the versatile war device ascend into the sky.



The mission assigned to the command was concrete: an imminent attack was being plotted on a civilian target of great magnitude. The pro-Russians had taken over the entire area; there, they had claimed unilateral independence which Russia welcomed with open arms, despite international pressure. The strategic location of the territory in the southern peninsula for the Black Sea Fleet made their claim powerless.

They had twenty-four hours to figure out if it had been the rebels, the Ukrainian army, or an extremist group akin to Daesh who was planning yet another savage stunt to neutralize them. The Kremlin appeared somewhat agitated. The following night, an amphibious boat was to wait for them on a beach in the Sea of Azov to take them to a Kildin-class destroyer where there was a direct line to high command. After consulting his GPS, Serkin instructed Corporal Dmitry Mikhailov to follow him into the forest. PFC Masha Ivanova and her partner Inga Simonova soon followed, accompanied by rookie Lyov Baranov, who was making his debut that night on his first nocturnal special operation. They took a long run towards a main highway, leaving behind the yellowish city lights of Novoazovsk, now under the control of Ukrainian pro-division groups. Aleksey extended the map and studied the terrain along with Dmitry. Masha kept a vigilant eye behind her AN94 assault rifle —which was not exactly her weapon of choice. She was used to the almighty AK74 and felt the complexity of the Nikonova 1994 was overblown, although its double shot gust and virtually non-existent recoil made it a remarkable weapon.

Masha's partner peered through the scope of her weapon as she guarded the opposite flank while young Lyov was skittish and overly attentive to the slightest odd sound. They started heading out once more when a muffled whistle went off. It was a missile. "Take cover!" the corporal cried in anguish. They each dove for cover wherever they could as the projectile made impact fifty feet away. The shrapnel managed to reach three of them, and though no one was killed, Masha was badly hurt. A sharp wedge had carved a three-inch wound on the right side of her abdomen right below her liver, on her left side another metal chunk was lodged in her intestine, and a larger piece amputated a portion of the little finger on her right hand. Aleksey was hit in the head by a shard that almost pierced his helmet leaving him stunned on the ground. Mikhailov suffered a deep cut on his right shoulder, a perforated eardrum and lost an earlobe. Inga was unharmed and Baranov —stroked by beginner's luck— returned from the mission unscathed.

The wounded needed emergency surgery at once. Helping each other as best they could, they reached the beach for evacuation. The entire mission went up in flames before it even began. Two days later on that fateful 17th of July, a ground-to-air missile launched from a location near Grabovo, took down Malaysian Airlines' Boeing 777 along with two-hundred and three passengers and fifteen cabin crew members on board. The Ukrainian, Russian, United States, and European Union governments reprimanded one another as the nearly three hundred deceased observed sepulchral silence.

*ANAPA, KRASNODAR KRAI
RUSSIA
Monday, July 21, 2014*

The military hospital in the small port city of Anapa where Masha had her surgery was one of the most cutting-edge in the western region of the Federation. On a bay of the northern coast of the Black Sea and alongside the mouth of the river that gave it its name, it held the dubitable honor of treating the largest number of soldiers in all of Russia, surpassing the hospital in Moscow. After two procedures and considerable hospitalization, Maria Ivanova walked out of there with a few dependencies, starting with her short-term disability pension that ended quickly upon the completion of her contract with the army within the next seven weeks. They deemed her useless for military tactics and terminated her contract, putting her out on the street at age 29, stripping her of the benefits that she would have received at the end of her military career. She was also dependent on the tranquilizers and anxiolytics she needed to sleep and to banish the recurring nightmares that visited her in the darkness of her bedroom while in the company of Morpheus. Then there was vodka —her opiate addiction substitute— but she had already hopelessly succumbed to it long before the Ukraine incident. And finally, dependent on a meager salary of a souvenir shop located on Arbat street —now a pedestrian mall in the historical center of Moscow, place par excellence for artists, academics and aristocrats, where she found employment after leaving the healthcare facility with less than fifty-three thousand rubles in her bank account.

*MOSCOW, CENTRAL DISTRICT
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
Saturday, October 4, 2014*

While she sold horrible crystal globes with fake snow perpetually falling over St. Basil's Cathedral, she rearranged the polychromed *matryoshkas* that tourists left in disarray on the shelves or she counted the wooden Jojloma spoons that mysteriously disappeared each day. Masha continued training in a high-performance gym to get back into the shape she was in and to one day quit this job which she needed temporarily to make ends meet. Down the road, she planned on getting employment as a military trainer or perhaps as a bodyguard.



Every first Saturday in October, before closing in the afternoon, the shop owner happily counted the thick stacks of rubles, dollars, and euros that overflowed the day's cash register. Even though the snow had fallen quite generously over the capital that week, winter tourism had been profitable thanks to the inexpensive offers from tour operators which produced a significant increase in store visits. Vladimir Gagarin, the shop owner, always treated the young ex-military shopkeeper quite well. Though it must be said that when his wife wasn't around, as in this moment, Masha could feel the sneaky glances at her rear or breasts, but never gave it much thought, after all. She figured he was just your typical married man bored of the repeated and small menu he had at home.

Unfortunately, that day was different. After counting the money and while Masha was leaning over the counter looking over some receipts, Vladimir came up behind her. Without uttering a single word, he pounced, crushing her against the glass counter and immobilizing her. With his left hand he squeezed her breast and with the other he reached under her long, flared skirt inserting his fingers underneath her panties. Masha felt her boss' intense excitement and her mouth began to fill up with a nasty taste of bile as she recalled an incident from her youth. Without a moment's notice and with all her strength, she catapulted backwards slamming Vladimir against the shelves in the back. The decorated Easter eggs crashed on the ground, shattering into a million pieces along with numerous families of Russian dolls. With a single and precise move, Masha twisted her boss' arm dislocating his left shoulder, forcing him to release her. She quickly turned her body and kicked the shopkeeper's ribs with the thick heel of her *katiuska* cracking two ribs and crushing a lung. Vladimir Gagarin howled in pain as he slid down the wall; without hesitation, Masha thrust a quick, dry punch directly at his septum pulverizing it into tiny, bloody splinters. The shopkeeper who had blood pouring down all over his face and was about to lose consciousness from insufferable pain, began to weep on the ground. Her ice-cold blue eyes, much like those of an Alaskan husky, peered down at him devoid of the slightest hint of mercy.

"Is this what you wanted?", she said as she hiked up her skirt.

She pulled down her underwear, letting it slide down her legs and out through her winter boots. Her pubic area —out in full view— exhibited her partly shaven, mesmerizing and desirable genitals. She lifted her right foot and rested it on the wall placing the shopkeeper's head directly under her thigh and proceeded to relieve her bladder. An intense stream of pale, golden fluid sprinkled all over his body mixing blood and urine into a sweet and foul compound. Vladimir, who had stopped sobbing, began to do so again more from the humiliation and despair rather than from the intense pain that seized him. When she was done, Masha walked over to the cash register, grabbed a stack of bills, withdrawing ninety thousand rubles and slipped her black panties into one of the little drawers, as a souvenir. As she headed to the door, she walked past the man puddled on the ground:

"By the way", she said as she put on her coat, "I won't be coming to work tomorrow. I quit. I'm taking this month's wages plus my severance pay. Take care of yourself and give my best to Nastia." She marched off with great satisfaction —strong, in great shape, and fully recovered from her injuries. Feeling secure that her life was about to take an important turn, she rushed to find a metro station with the freedom and alacrity that walking in a skirt —without any underwear on— in freezing cold weather could provide.

1

*PUERTO MARINA, BENALMÁDENA
COSTA DEL SOL, SPAIN
Thursday, June 23, 2016*

Maria Nikolayevna Ivanova vigorously dried her hair with a soft Portuguese cotton towel, stood in front of the dining room mirror and stared at her reflection. She removed her white bathrobe and observed her beautiful figure. Her body was slender, sensual and at the same time fibrous, a product of training sessions and extensive hours at the gym. She was 5'6", weighed 120lbs, her hair was blonde and in a French cut, now hardly visible due to her wet curls. Her head tilted and she contemplated her strong muscular arms that could do one-hundred twenty push-ups without a break. She had a Mexican *Santa Muerte* tattoo on her left forearm, symbolizing righteous death, protection of the faithful, although these days it's associated with drug trafficking, prostitution and piracy. She stroked her perfectly firm, round breasts and smiled. They were perfect —not that her original breasts weren't attractive— but they were small. The surgery had cost a good amount of cash and was quite painful, but it provided her with the confidence and sexual prowess that she yearned. Her hands traveled down her chest to her stomach coming across the two scars that were still visible around her belly button. She impetuously touched them as if reliving the incident in Ukraine. Suddenly she stopped and turned around in discontent. It's impossible. Had she put on some weight?

"Nu ya i raskobanela!", she cried out angrily.

Sure, she took a few liberties with her diet on the weekends, but that had never been an issue before, thanks to her rigorous training. It's not like she looked like a boar either, as she proclaimed in Russian. She entered the bathroom once more, scooped up the scale from under the sink with her foot, got on top and looked down.



“Looking good, looking really good,” she thought out loud and smiled composedly. She kicked the scale back into place and continued to admire herself in front of the bathroom mirror, scanning her entire body, luscious genitals and firm, smooth legs. Only her knees and elbows stood out from a nearly perfect female specimen. They were worn down and a bit deformed due to all the physical rigor they had gone through. She sat on the bed and grabbed a white push-up bra —no underwire— from one of the bedroom drawers, and a pair of matching white panties. They always had to match. She couldn’t stand wearing parts of different lingerie styles together, not to mention different colors. She did not get that from her mother.

She remembered her when she was a child in the village of Molodoshkovo around the Pskov region, nowadays reduced to a stagnant demographic and relentless rural depopulation. She took care of little Masha, the youngest of three siblings and the only girl in the family. They all worked in the fields and shared a simple home in the middle of nowhere. They barely survived on what they scraped together from the farm. There were no luxuries, no excesses —almost nothing at all. She remembered watching her mother as she washed herself in her mismatched, ugly, worn out and ruined undergarments. Masha promised herself that her life would be different.

And she kept her promise ever since she left that arid, futureless land at the age of fifteen. So now she wore soft silk and current fashion trends like the garments she bought at Women’s Secret the previous afternoon. She slipped on a white sleeveless T-shirt then the holster for her Makarov PM pistol, considered a collector’s item by some, but functional and simple for those in the armed forces. She threw on a beige blouse, adjusted only two buttons and stuffed herself into a pair of tight jeans, worn out and ripped at the knees, finishing off with a pair of Adidas running shoes.

She picked up a set of keys from a little plate by the front door, and a photograph she had printed in the photo shop nearby. She stuffed everything in her bag and went out the door, closing gently behind her.

In the presumably idyllic Benalmádena Sports Harbor, better known as Puerto Marina, the Mediterranean calmly flows into the dock gently rocking the vessels anchored there, some of which are of considerable worth. The exclusive residential area's distinct architecture, private services and restricted tourist access, provides its residents a level of tranquility amidst the mediocrity of restaurants and leisure activity that invaded the dock on a daily basis. As Masha sat inside the parked white Audi S3 rental, she reflected on her situation. She remembered that fateful day when she met Sergey. Six months after being released from the military hospital, Masha was completing an intensive Spanish course in the Cervantes Institute of Moscow when she encountered him at an Easter luncheon being given by the students and collaborators. Sergey Sokolov was an older man, tall, blonde and handsome. He dressed elegantly but carried himself with the nonchalance of someone who knows he is impeccable and can therefore afford a rebellious stunt. He displayed an aura of confidence that made him fascinating to watch. He knew everything about young Masha: her work with the armed forces, her hasty exit from Ukraine, her financial status, her family life, even her sudden departure from her job at the souvenir shop.



That was not their only encounter. After a few seemingly inconsequential, but deeply patriotic, conversations, he showed up once again at the end of the school year celebration in June. This time, he didn't beat around the bush. He approached her with a canape in his hand and summoned her for an alleged job interview the next day in Gorky Park. Maria didn't know what to say as Sergey poured her a glass of wine while gazing at her with his penetratingly intense blue eyes. He seduced her—in every aspect. Not only did she attend the meeting at Gorky Park the following day, but she ended up frolicking in her room with this forty-something-year-old stranger. She recalled the moment they sat on a bench in the university campus near the Moskva River:

“My dear Mishenka”, he said with a paternal air, “you are the one we've been searching for,” he said and continued to explain his job offer. Outside of her family, no one had ever spoken to her with so much affection. The job consisted of “dismissing” a persona non grata, whose actions and behaviors posed a dangerous threat to the higher tiers in the Russian Federation and even to national security.

Surprisingly, Masha did not reject this crazy proposal. She was only able to ask, with some hesitation, why exactly she had been chosen. Sergey explained that the Federal Security Service and the Foreign Intelligence Service felt that her background was brilliant; she came from noble beginnings and possessed unquestionable dedication and efficacy. During the long walks on the days that followed, they reflected on personal integrity and the virtually lost Soviet nationalist sentiment. The session was finalized in Masha's bed. After passionate, wild lovemaking, she received the instructions for her first mission.

Nikolai Golubev was a nuclear engineer, 38 years of age. He had it all: prominent social status, a high salary, a gorgeous wife, and an adorable four-year-old daughter. They lived in a spacious house in Severodvinsk, one of those military villages

that don't appear on maps and are off limits to foreigners. He was to live there for four years until he finalized a project for a floating nuclear plant that would supply the most remote areas outside the main Russian networks near Siberia which frequently suffered from a lack of power supply. It isn't clear whether it was out of ambition, new job expectations or the need to get out of that inhospitable place, but the issue is that Nikolai sold the project plans along with his consultation to North Korea for a large sum of money. He was declared an enemy of the state and the Federal Security service was after him. He settled permanently in Helsinki with his family, far from the clutches of the motherland. After a brief period of tactical preparation, Masha went to Finland looking for him. It took about three months to find him and only ten seconds to blow his head off at point-blank in his garage. Mission accomplished. Back home. Back to bed with Sergey.

A persistent horn brought Masha back to reality. As she walked through the narrow entrance to the port, a well-groomed, dark-haired guy of undetermined age with an old-fashioned yuppie air, stopped his car in front of her. He drove a horrid, piercing yellow Golf Cabriolet that was well maintained considering how old it was.

“Hello gorgeous! It’s been a few days since I’ve seen you around the pool!”, the man exclaimed —excited to see her. “Hope you haven’t developed an aversion to water?”, he went on sarcastically, “because I couldn’t stand it if I had to stop marveling at your fabulous body from my window...”

Masha looked out the open window of her car and flashed a fake smile at her neighbor.

“I’ve been very busy working, Fabricio. I take it you can handle not seeing me for a few days.”

“My little Russian princess, I am incapable of being one minute without seeing you! Let me remind you that we have a pending dinner date...”

“We’ll talk, can’t make any promise right now.”

“Alright, sweetheart. I’ll remind you later this afternoon. *Addio!*” and sped off through the forged gate after opening it with the remote control. Masha gasped and waved. Fabricio Peruzzi was from Málaga, born from an Argentinian father and an Italian mother. One could say Fabricio had it all:

**33% Argentinian
33% Italian
33% Spanish =
99% Get fucked.**

Ever since she had arrived three weeks earlier at the luxury apartment compound where she was temporarily residing, Fabricio tried asking her out twice before even getting to know her. Undoubtedly, a woman with beautiful Russian traits was prime prey for the Italian-Argentinian. Masha resisted, but deep down she knew that she had to either accept or put a bullet through his head. Although the latter didn’t seem like a bad idea, it wasn’t part of the plan. Her Russian mind couldn’t grasp the concept of Mediterranean Latino men pursuing women until the point of exhaustion where all they could do is agree to sleep with him. In this regard, her eastern male countrymen were much more direct: they drank, they paid for the drinks and if she so desired, they fucked. Not very complicated. If the attempt failed, they kept on drinking and tried again another night with another girl. Based on the laws of probability, sooner or later a girl would get drunk enough to cave in.

Meanwhile on the lavish waterfront complex, Masha prepared for her next job. Most of the residents were wealthy business people —jet setters— and movie stars who fled from more popular spots as well as high profile tourists that traveled around in their rented yachts so they could be seen. They gave life to those huge apartments that had fallen into decline a few years ago due to the crisis. Aside from the workers that maintained the place, Fabricio, and perhaps three or four other permanent residents, people came and went, each minding their own business. This made it easy for Masha to go unnoticed, which was her main objective.

Before starting the car, she took the photograph that she'd previously put away. Her next victim, her project at present, was her imminent objective. This was a man of medium complexion, tall, dark hair and eyes and a penetrating gaze. He was Basque, from the north of Spain, forty-five years old, divorced and eccentric. Who else would travel by train throughout Spain for months on end? Eccentric, clearly, or a complete idiot —which was always a possibility. In two days, she was due to 'cross paths' with him on board the Al-Andalus: a luxury tourist train which starts its route from Seville —near the historic Guadalquivir River— to Madrid, it cruises through the Extremadura Route, then Toledo and Aranjuez. It was Spain's National Rail Service's brainchild for luxury tourist trains in the southern peninsula, complementing the circuit by way of Andalusia.

Anyway, she didn't think it was that complicated. Actually, she didn't feel any of her *jobs* were complicated to say the least.

After giving Nikolai, the engineer, the old heave ho, her next assignment was back in Moscow. Anna Kozlova, a new Russian aristocrat with ties to the Rossiya Bank shareholders' dark underbelly, was making life more difficult than it needed

to be for one of the most powerful leaders in the pipeline construction and electric industries. Anna was bisexual, a fan of S & M, cocaine and other obscure vices, she had threatened to leak to the press some photos in which respectable oil industry personalities were not seen in a favorable light. In exchange, she asked for a substantial sum of rubles to keep her mouth shut. But Masha would see to it that her little mouth would never speak again. Initially, the police or intelligence services were going to take care of the matter themselves, but after a campaign by Putin's opposition, Alexei Navalny, accusing the government of creating a *neo-feudal system*, they decided it was better to tackle the problem from another angle. Maria Ivanova approached Anna at the boring pre-Christmas party thrown by an all-powerful Chinese company that manufactured low-cost electronic components. She wore a suede suit that hugged her body but was loose enough at the neckline so that the aristocrat would not miss Masha and her breasts upon entering the party.

"I find this place a bit tight and asphyxiating", Masha said with a naughty, mischievous look on her face, "perhaps you have something a little more exciting at home?"

“Actually, I may have something even more restraining”, Kozlova responded, taking Masha by the waist.

In less than an hour, the two women were in the luxury Ostozhenka Street apartment owned by a construction tycoon and on loan to Anna. After offering her guest a drink, Anna threw at her a leather mask, some handcuffs and a tight latex outfit with the appropriate apertures to be able to enjoy her company.

“Put these on!”, she ordered Masha as she headed to the bathroom to get herself ready.

When Anna returned, Masha was on the sofa, just as she had left her, sipping her drink.

“I thought I said to put these on, bitch!”, the host yelled violently, wearing a black nightie and spiked heels, “You’re my slave”, she added.

“No”, answered the Russian secret agent while setting her glass on the wicker table and picking up a sofa cushion to cover her pistol, “I’m not your slave, I’m your assassin.”

“Can you aim that thing somewhere other than my face? I’d like to be remembered as I am now and not as a bloody mess.” she had the nerve to ask.

Masha, ruthless and cold, without a minimal display of humanity, got up, thrust the barrel of her Makarov into Anna’s ribs and burst her heart in a clean, single, silenced shot. Anna fell into her arms and her breasts, wet with warm blood, stirred in Masha a pleasurable sensation as she held her body. She left her sitting on the floor in an extravagant pose. Undoubtedly a disconcerting situation—the presumptuous woman was consistent even in her last moments.

She smiled, looking back on that luxurious apartment in one of the wealthiest and most exclusive areas of Moscow. ‘Someone’ had swept the place and scoured the slightest trace. This didn’t bother Masha. Anna Kozlova was an unscrupulous bitch who gambled with her life and finally lost having set bets that were too high, just like Nikolai Golubev.

She now faced another mission and all she knew about this one, were four basic things. Only this time around, Masha did not understand why he was considered an enemy of her country. But finding out was not her job, that’s not what she was getting paid to do.