

The Prophet of Khorugh

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Tajikistan, USSR: 1984

A near empty bus has several benefits. And two came to mind as Liana Kamorova peered out a frosty window. For one thing, there would be fewer casualties if the bus careened off a steep cliff; something which nearly happened during their two-hour journey down the mountain. But more importantly, the dearth of passengers meant she and Andrei could hold private conversations; conversations she wanted to keep from two plainclothes KGB agents—one at the front of the bus, the other at the back—conducting a not so covert surveillance of her and Andrei. She was certain they were here under Major Zamiatin's orders. That vial monster was at it again.

Liana sat back in her seat and closed her eyes with a groan, thinking about the war and their immanent return to Afghanistan: she, to her duties as a Soviet Army GRU intelligence officer; and Andrei, as an attack helicopter pilot heading back to the front to hunt and kill *mujahideen*. But for now—for a few short hours—she and Andrei had the unusual fortune to spend a day of hard earned leave together. A short but needed break from the now five-year long bloody war. A war the Party hacks back in Moscow called Russia's socialist duty to their neighbor.

She checked her wristwatch, a gift from an American bio-chemist she ran as an agent during her posting to America. Tracing her fingertip across the five small letters printed on the watch face, she whispered, "Hey there, little TIMEX friend. Soon, if all goes well, I'll be permanently living in the country of your birth." She smiled and returned to studying the Tajikistan landscape. The countryside draped as far as she could see—like an Ivan Shishkin painting, vast and rich, with greens, yellows, browns and every shade in between.

She thought about the past few years: she and Andrei thrown together in Afghanistan, one of the most inhospitable places on earth, fighting a war neither of them wanted; a war where the death toll had already eclipsed that of the population of a small country; a war that caused her to lose her one precious gift—not to the man she loved, but to a man she despised. And along this rocky journey, the sorrow, the pain, the cargo of grief became a weight her Russian soul could not bear.

She thought about death and wanted to believe it was easy to live too, but could not. Not in this God-forsaken war, not because of this man—that animal.

Oh Lord. Please don't forsake me.

To live? To die? Whose loss is it anyway? Everyone pays at some point. If not today, then tomorrow. The war staggers on as young men misplace their lives for an early grave, Afghan children—their legs, mothers—their teenage boys, young women—their lovers.

Liana buried her head in her hands. *The madness of it all.*

Everyone was a loser in this war, and she wondered when her time will come. But on second thought, she knew everything had already been taken from her. She was walking wounded, living dead. All dignity stripped from her life by one violent act, replaced by shame, guilt ... nightmares.

It ached in places inside of her she didn't know she had.

She turned to her seat companion whose eyes were closed, head bobbing back and forth to the rock-and-sway of the bus as it trundled down the gravel mountain road. The sight of him—a veteran combat helicopter pilot—sleeping like a small child, brightened her melancholy mood. He had come to her rescue that fateful day a year ago. The day she was arrested and strapped onto an “interrogation” table in a KGB outpost.

The day she lost her life.

She held Andrei's hand as he dozed and thanked God they were together now. At least she hoped so. And soon—God willing—they'd begin a new life, if only they can escape the clutches of the all eclipsing Soviet monster. Then—maybe then—she can begin to heal and forget her past, forget the man who ravaged her. Then—maybe then—her Russian soul can reawaken. But she was frightened, scared of the bitterness that ate away at her heart, leaving a gaping hole in her chest. Fearful of what she knew she was capable of doing if she ever caught that animal alone. She rationalized it would be an act of self-defense—a single righteous act of violence to right the act of violence committed against her.

A line from the Bible coursed through her mind: *Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.* But no matter how many times she rehearsed those words, she could not let go. She knew she had to end it before it happened again. And she knew it would, because he promised her it would.

Tears pooled in her eyes and she wiped hard at them with the palms of her hands. She hung her head, and in barely a whisper, said, “I wasn't raised to know you, Lord. But I do believe in you and I need you now. Please tell me what to do, where to turn. Please give me a word. My life is fracturing and needs to take a turn or there'll be no return.”

Andrei woke, turned and brushed strands of short golden hair behind her ear while studying her damp blue eyes. “Hey, hey, little one. I can't begin to imagine how difficult this is for you. Are you all right?”

"I'll be all right, I guess."

"Are you sure? Because I'm not so sure."

"If I can manage to forget, I think I might be all right." She shrugged. "But I can't forget. Everything has changed."

"Well, we have a day off. That should help. And if we're lucky, a bright future ahead of us. Remember our plans? No war for us." He squeezed her knee. "That helps a bit, doesn't it?"

"I don't think I believe in the future. Whatever chance there was for a future was stolen from me. And as for time off? I need a week off ... a month off ... my life off."

He folded her in his arms and whispered. "You're a fighter. Please don't give up. If not for yourself, then for me. We'll get through this together. I'm right beside you?"

She relaxed in his arms and sighed, absorbing a little of his strength. "I guess we've come too far for me to give up now." She forced a thin smile. "I'll try."

"There you go. I want to see more of that."

"You may not see much of it until we're safe in TIMEX-land."

"*What* land?"

"Nothing. I'll try my best to smile. So, how long before we make it to town? I'm starving."

"Ahh, now I know you're feeling better. You're thinking about food."

"I always think about food. It's my passion. So how long, fly boy?"

He glanced out the window. "About an hour, I think. Will you last that long?"

"I can manage. Besides, I still have something left from our snack. You want some?"

"No thanks. I'll wait."

"Suit yourself." She dug into her backpack and retrieved the remains of her snack while Andrei grabbed another nap—something only a helicopter pilot could do on a bouncing bus.

She studied the scenery unfolding before her as she munched on her spicy sausage and butter biscuit. They soon passed through the last mountain ravine and the view gave way to a spectacular wide valley below. The contrast jolted her. Less than two hours ago high in the mountains, they rode through a world of snow, ice and gray angry clouds. Clouds that threatened to gobble them whole. But now, down in the valley, spring had arrived.

She wiped a greasy hand on Andrei's kaki pants as he snored beside her, wondering if she was going to be shackled to a life with this man snoring at her side every night. She certainly hoped so. They both desperately needed a second chance.

Andrei woke a half hour later and pointed out the window. “Hey, there’s Khorugh. We’re almost there.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. She made out a round golden-domed mosque in the center of town, and a towering white church steeple at the far end of what she believed to be the main street. A broad river skirted the town on its south and east perimeters, flowing full to the banks from the early spring snowmelt.

The bus arrived in town and they disembarked. Other than a meal later, Liana and Andrei had no agenda.

“Let’s hit the bazaar,” Liana said. She stopped suddenly and dug into her coat pocket, remembering she needed to wear *hijab*—standard Soviet issue head covering for all female soldiers serving in South-Central Asia. She retrieved the drab gray scarf and pulled it over her head, frowning at Andrei. “How do I look?”

“Very sexy.” He pointed to his left. “I think the bazaar’s just a couple streets over.”

They wandered through the ancient town, enjoying an early spring day in Khorugh, Tajikistan. As they passed by a turban domed mosque, they admired its colorful tiles, gilded spires, minarets and lofty colonnades. It was unlike any architecture either of them had seen in Russia.

At one point, Liana discreetly peered behind her as they turned a corner and saw one of the KGB officers. She brushed strands of blonde hair behind her ear, tucking it back under her *hijab*. *They couldn’t know, could they? Does Zamiatin know?*

She spoke softly to Andrei. “One of our tails from the bus is behind us. Keep your eye out for the other one. I don’t like being surveilled.”

As they strolled through town, they admired several old houses adorned with white pillars, large verandas, colorfully trimmed windows, and black iron railings. Between each home, were beautiful gardens with large cypress trees and fountains. Someone in this town has money, Liana thought.

They soon arrived at the downtown merchant district with its large open-air bazaar. Liana’s eyes grew as large as duck eggs as she took in tables, handcarts and donkey carts filling an entire block. The bazaar was awash in a sea of clothing, pottery, jewelry, animals, and food. Liana heard people talking in several languages, most of which she knew.

Music from a live band floated on the cool air from somewhere to her right. Three instruments were most prominent to her: the *ney*, *mizmar*, and *rebaba*. A young man sang the Arabic lyrics from a classic Arab love poem: “When she began to sway, her beauty amazed me. She

imprisoned me with her glance. She was a swaying branch that consumed me." It was Liana's dream at that very moment that someday, Andrei would think of her in such a way.

Vanya's keen nose caught the rich smells of sweet fruit, raw earthy vegetables, and barbecued meats filling the air. All of it nearly overwhelming her senses, causing her mouth to water.

So used to the soot-gray Soviet north, Liana and Andrei stood there at the mouth of the bazaar exchanging bewildered glances. Finally, Andrei shrugged, stretched out his arm and waved from one side to the other. "Your bazaar awaits you, my princess."

Liana giggled, "Lets go." She bolted headlong into the bazaar.

Soon, her nose tracked the unmistakable aroma of fresh bread—a combination of sweet yeast and baking flour and an inviting bitter charcoal scent. Her search was rewarded with a teenage Tajik boy selling fresh *naan*.

She pointed to a stack of steaming flat bread and asked Andrei, "You want one?"

"I'll share."

She gave the boy two Rubles and a big smile. He grinned, throwing in an extra *naan*. She turned and handed one to Andrei.

He took the offered bread. "I thought we were going to share."

"I'm not sharing." She winked and took a bite. "Ouch! It's ha ... hot! Mmm ... taste."

They browsed the various tables and carts while munching on their bread, passing table after table of clothing: brilliant yellow, royal blue and green shawls, robes and men's white *taghiyyah* caps. At one table, two young women, perhaps in their early twenties, were selling an assortment of colorful scarves. The young women wore their black hair tucked under purple and yellow scarves. They smiled at Andrei and Liana through dark brown eyes set elegantly on slim almond faces.

Liana poked Andrei. "Look at these scarves. They're beautiful."

He nodded, mentally comparing Liana's drab gray scarf to a particular turquoise scarf for sale. "Yes. Very bright. Like spring."

They moved on when Liana's nose shot into the air again. She grasped Andrei's hand and loped off like a golden retriever. She soon found a merchant roasting lamb kebabs over a wood-fired grill. They stood, observing the gray bearded man turning skewered chunks of meat, red peppers and onions until Liana couldn't resist the smell any longer.

The man gestured to her and she bobbed up and down on her heels shaking her head yes.

Andrei stepped forward. "My treat."

"Two?" She grinned.

He laughed and paid the man six Rubles. The man pulled two kebabs from the grill, placed each one on a piece of brown paper, sprinkled them with a pinch of salt, pepper and scallions, then handed them to Andrei with a brown crooked-tooth smile.

Andrei passed one to Liana and she took a bite of the steaming meat. He watched with satisfaction as she closed her eyes, savoring the rich taste.

As they meandered through the bazaar, Liana glanced behind her from time to time to see if their KGB surveillance was keeping up. She hadn't "burned" the second man yet, but the first seemed more interested in chatting-up the young ladies; something in this staunchly conservative culture he should know better than to do. But to Liana's relief, he kept drifting further back.

They spent the next hour browsing carts and tables lined with everything from ceramic pottery, watches, pirated VHS movies, precious (or maybe not so precious) gems, to knives, swords and daggers.

Liana asked, "So where's this restaurant you told me about?"

Andrei gawped at her. "You're actually hungry?"

"Not now, but I need a plan."

He glanced around, then pointed. "Right there, behind where our other KGB tail is loitering. Want to go over there and shake him up a bit? Tell him the dear Major Dimitri Zamiatin is looking for him."

"Don't you dare joke about that man. Not around me." She blew out a sigh. "Anyway, I want to check out some jewelry that I see a couple stalls ahead of us. You want to tag along?"

"I'm sorry. And no thanks. You go ahead. I've got to pick something up. Let's split up and give our two tails a little exercise. We'll meet back up for lunch."

Andrei made his way back through the bazaar, to the table with the two young Tajik women selling scarves, while Liana zigzagged between throngs of people to a kiosk with mounds of jewelry spread out over several tables. A *babushka*—a grandmotherly woman—stood between the tables. Liana, observed the woman was perhaps in her late sixties, shaped like a pear, with light-brown skin and long gray hair rolled up in a bun.

"May I help you, ma'am?" The *babushka* asked in broken Russian.

"Yes, I hope so," Liana replied in fluent Tajik. "I think I'd like to buy a piece of jewelry."

The *babushka* smiled, delighted Liana spoke her own native tongue. "Perhaps a necklace or earrings?" She said, her hand running over several gold and silver pieces of jewelry. "Or maybe a

ring. I have a large assortment of old and new. Many made by local silver and goldsmiths. She held up an elegant antique ring. “This one came to me from the mysterious, far-off land of Tibet. It’s been in my possession for twenty years. Legend has it that it had been in the Dalai Lama’s family for hundreds of years. Do you like it?”

“Oh, yes I do. It’s lovely.” Liana held out her hand. “May I?”

“Of course.” The *babushka* handed her the ring.

Liana held it up to the flame-blue Tajik sky. It glinted in the sunlight, and she noted the band was polished silver with ornate etchings carved into it. The top of the ring held a cream colored disk, of what she believed to be bone. Etched into the disk, was a detailed scrimshaw of a beautiful bird—a Japanese Accentor.

The *babushka* pointed to the ring’s top. “Here. It opens right here. Try it.”

Liana opened the top as instructed. “There’s a small compartment in there.” She beamed. “That’s wonderful.”

The woman shook her head. “Yes, secret and mysterious, don’t you think?”

Liana bobbed her head, turning the ring in her fingers, admiring every angle. “It’s absolutely gorgeous.”

“Yes it is. And that’s only on the outside.”

“What do you mean?”

“This ring has very special powers, ma’am.”

“Really?” Liana arched her eyebrows.

“Oh, yes! It can be your protector. It can save your life.”

“How so?”

“Simple. By placing a bit of poison in the compartment to take the life of another.”

Liana laughed and handed back the ring. “You’re just playing with me.”

“Oh, no, dear. I’m not.” She tapped the top of the ring. “You see ... inside this ring is the power to stop evil. But you must never use it for personal gain. Only for survival.”

Liana admired the ring in the woman’s open palm and frowned. “I don’t think I believe you. Although I’d like to. I think I might have use for it.”

“Well, you may not believe this old lady, but my eye caught you in the crowd from afar, and I immediately knew—knew after all these years—that for some unknown reason, this special ring was meant for you, Ms. Kamorova.”

Liana stepped back, wide-eyed. “You ... How ... Ah ... How do you know my name?”

The *babushka* placed a leathery hand on Liana’s forearm. “I’m terribly sorry, my dear. I did not

mean to startle you. Sometimes God shows me things. That's all."

"Um ... that's *all*? God gave you my *name*?"

"It came to me as you approached. It's nothing really. Now, how about this ring?"

Liana took a few breaths to get her shakes under control, and after a few heart beats, she asked, "How much?"

"Two hundred Rubles, ma'am."

Liana let a few heartbeats pass, smiled and said, "All right. I'll take it." She fished money out of her pocket and counted. Only one hundred-fifty Rubles. "Oh, no."

"Anything wrong, dear?"

"No. It's alright." She dug into her other pocket and frowned. Empty.

"What's wrong, young lady?"

Liana studied her drab brown shoes. "I'm sorry. I won't be able to buy this wonderful ring. But I really do love it."

The woman regarded her through bright gray eyes that seemed to skewer into Liana's soul.

Liana flinched. "Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I'm sensing something through you. May I hold your hand a moment?"

"Uh ... all right." Liana tentatively held out her hand.

The woman held Liana's hand in both of hers and studied Liana's blue eyes. She pressed her thumbs into the palm of Liana's hand and Liana felt a jolt of electricity run down her spine. The hairs on the nape of her neck stood up and her hand began shaking, her knees trembling like leaves in a thunderstorm.

The woman continued studying Liana's eyes, rubbing her hand for a full minute. Then she tilted her head back and let out a deep sigh.

Liana had never experience anything like this and was on the verge of panic. Now her entire body began trembling and she felt as if she would faint. "What's wrong?" She asked.

The woman smiled. "Oh, no. There's nothing wrong, dear. Nothing at all. God gave me a bit of a vision, that's all."

"God gave you a vision?"

"Yes. I sense that you must follow your heart. It will lead you to your destiny."

"My what?"

"Your destiny, my dear. But first I feel ... no ... God is showing me that you're living in darkness and silence. Your fear, the pain and the terror, have eaten at you for so very long. The waiting for it to happen again. The anxiety. The nightmares that invade during the night. Flashbacks during the

day. I see all of this now and know it's impossible for you to see the way ahead when all this trauma is living within you. But be comforted, dear one. For I see clearly that demon of a man who descended on you like a rabid creature and broke your heart, stole your womanhood, your very soul. And I assure you, he will never harm you again. God will not allow it."

The woman closed her eyes, swayed from side to side, all the time holding and rubbing Liana's hand. After a few moments she said, "Soon, very soon, you will be grounded and released from the torture of the past. Have hope, dear one. God sees a bright future for you and the one you love. Your pain will heal. Your heart and your Russian soul will recover. Your spirit will be reborn. You will be whole beyond all imagination. This is your destiny, dear one."

Liana, who a minute ago, had been dabbing at damp eyes, now wiped at tears streaming down her cheeks in thin rivulets. Her eyes were rimmed red, and her shoulders heaved as she wept.

The old woman rocked her head back and sighed again.

Liana choked out through sobs, "Oh...what is it now?"

The woman reached up and cupped Liana's damp flush cheeks in her hands. "Well, dear one, I've had another vision from on high. You will soon be blessed with a child. A beautiful red-haired, green-eyed baby girl."

Liana's jaw dropped. "But ... um ... I mean, that's impossible. I ... I've never—"

"No, no, dear one. Not yet, but soon."

"Oh, my Lord! You saw all this in my eyes?"

"In your eyes and through God's still voice." She brushed tears from Liana's cheek. "And there's something more."

"I don't know if I can bare anything more. This is too much." She reached up and held the woman's wrinkled hands. "Oh, please tell me."

"Well, dear ... your child? She will be wild at heart, this one. She will be a prophet for good and will have the ability to read a person's soul through their eyes. God will speak through her and she will see things that no one else can. And when she is about your age she will save her life and yours, as well as scores of others because of her prophetic powers."

Liana felt lightheaded. White spots danced before her eyes. And before she knew it, she buckled to the ground, placing both palms down on the dirty street for balance. Clenching her eyes shut, she took several slow deep breaths, shaking her head from side to side. *My Lord! I'm going to have a baby. A girl.*

When she finally got hold of herself, she staggered to her feet and faced the woman. "If I ... If I hadn't heard it for myself, I wouldn't believe it. But I ... I know in my heart all you've told me is true

... will come true. And I can't thank you enough. You've lifted such a terrible burden from me."

Knowing Liana could not afford the ring, the *babushka* slipped it onto Liana's ring finger, saying, "This ring is destiny's gift to you, my dear. May it bring you much joy."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you for *everything*." She reached out and hugged the old woman. "You are a blessing to me. A much needed gift."

When they parted, they both had tears in their eyes, and the woman said, "You, dear one, are the one who is the blessing. And as I said, a little girl will spring into this dark world through you and the one you love, and she will be a blessing to many. Now go ... follow your heart, and find where it leads you. I hope you realize your dreams."

Liana chewed her lower lip. "Apparently I will."

As agreed upon, they met for lunch before returning to base. The café on the outskirts of town was small and quaint. Through a large picture window, they enjoyed a spectacular view of the snow-covered Pamir mountain range towering above them.

"What would you like?" Andrei asked.

"I don't know. Something light, I guess."

"Really? Do you feel okay? I thought you were famished."

"How about a fresh cucumber salad, and some bread and cheese?"

"Sounds perfect." Andrei placed their order.

After their waitress left, Liana held Andrei's eyes a moment and whispered, "I'm concerned about those two KGB goons tailing us." She nervously bunched her napkin in her fist.

"What can they do? They know nothing. You shouldn't worry."

"Well, dear friend, I disagree. Sorry, but something *is* wrong."

"I guess you're right. I shouldn't have made light of it. I'm sorry again. Looks like I've been saying sorry a lot lately."

She smiled. "Don't worry. That's what men are supposed to do."

"Thanks for the enlightenment."

"No problem. Anyway, we need to make our move soon. So what's next?"

He nodded toward the approaching waitress. "Hold that thought."

The waitress arrived with their order and Liana wasted no time digging in.

"Oh! This is marvelous. The cucumbers are so crisp and sweet, and the tomatoes pop tart and juicy in my mouth. Mmm... It's been years since I've enjoyed fresh vegetables."

After she savored a few bites, she leaned over the table and said in a low voice, matching the

hushed private conversations of the other patrons, “I had the strangest encounter a few minutes back. Look at my arms. They’re still covered with goose bumps. There was this kind old woman merchant who knew about my past and future.”

Andrei tipped back in his chair, pointing to her hand. “Hey, I’m not sure about the soothsayer stuff but where’d you get the ring?”

“From the woman.” She held out her hand. “Do you like it?”

“Kind of looks like something an old *babushka* would wear. Not a young blonde minx.”

She kicked him in the shin.

“Ouch! Why do you always do that?”

“Listen, it’s not just any old ring. The lady I got it from said it’s a poison ring. Take a look at this.” She opened the ring’s lid, exposing a small well. “See! A place for poison.”

“Get real, woman,” he whispered. “You’re an educated military intelligence officer who specializes in biological weapons. You actually believed her? She just took your hard earned rubles.”

“I didn’t buy it. She gave it to me.”

“You see! It’s junk.”

No it’s not! Well ... um, yeah, it might be a fake, but it’s gorgeous. I love it. Anyway, I’ll take it to my lab when we get back to base and test it.

Andrei rolled his eyes.

“You keep that up, you big monkey, and I’m going to kick you in the other shin.”

“Okay, okay. So you’ve got a nice old poison ring from a soothsayer. What are you going to do with it?”

“She’s a prophet, knucklehead.” Now, Vanya rolled her eyes. “Anyway, for starters, I’m going to use it on *you* if you don’t stop mocking me. Then, if that filthy pig, Zamiatin makes another move on me, I’m going to take him out.” She pondered the ring, knowing that at some point in time it may have actually contained poison. But now, if anything, probably only trace elements remained—as empty as a Russian drunk’s vodka bottle. She also knew she could whip up a few milligrams of ricin as easily as the next person could brew a samovar of tea. And if that pervert Zamiatin ever got so much as to within arms length again, she’d send him on an express train off this planet.

Andrei waved his hand in front of Liana’s face. “Hello...! You in there somewhere?”

Liana blinked, shaking her head. “Oh. Sorry. What were you saying?”

“I was *saying* ... time is out. We’ll have to move fast.”

“Agreed. When?”

“In three days, our squadron will have our helicopters fully loaded and fueled for our final

night qualification exercise before deployment.”

She nodded, swallowing a bite of black bread and goat cheese. “Go on.”

“Andrei was about to continue, but their waitress appeared near them, taking the order of another patron. Andrei put a finger to his lips, then sat back with a smile, observing Liana eating. “I thought you didn’t have an appetite.”

“I’m a woman. Change is my prerogative. Now, please pass the pickles.”

He did so and pointed to the cheese. “Care to share?”

“Sure,” she winked. “Just don’t get in the way when I have the knife in my hand.”

They ate quietly while enjoying the relaxed atmosphere of the café. Liana reflected on the extraordinary encounter with the old woman. The woman not only knew her name, but even knew what Zamiatin had done to her. And then the woman revealed the exact condition of her heart and soul. The woman knew she was in love with Andrei and would someday have his baby. How did this woman know all this? These were deeply personal, hidden thoughts; most of which Andrei didn’t even know. But the woman knew everything. She even indicated they would safely flee their Soviet oppressors. *God’s voice? Astounding.*

Liana set her fork down, fixed her eyes on Andrei and tugged on his shirtsleeve. “Of course,” she whispered. “It’s the perfect time. We’re to go on mountain maneuvers and we’ll be fully loaded: backpacks, snowshoes, climbing gear, food and weapons. *Andrei*, we’ll have everything we need.”

“See. I’m not so dumb after all.” He grinned, reached across the small table and gently brushed her cheek with his thumb.

“That’s so sweet,” she smiled. “What was that for?”

“You had a little crumb of bread on your cheek.”

“*Hmmph.*” She frowned at her plate of food with lost interest.

“What’s wrong?”

When she spoke, it wasn’t what was in her heart. What she actually thought was: *I love you, Andrei Andreiovich. I always have. And I’m going to have your baby. A little girl, by the way.*

Instead, she said, “It seems so impossible. I want to do this, but there’s so much at stake. So much that can go wrong. We could be—”

“Hey, hey.” Andrei touched her forearm. “I’m not saying it will be easy. In fact, it’ll be quite dodgy, especially in the mountains. This was the worst winter we’ve had in years, and the weather will be atrocious up there. But that’s what we’ve been trained for, isn’t it? We can do this.”

Liana’s knife was down, so Andrei chose a piece of blue cheese and popped it into his mouth.

He cut a couple of wedges from an apple and offered one to Liana.

She shook her head no.

“Anyway,” he continued, “night flight ops begins in three days at seventeen hundred hours. So meet me on pad five dressed in full winter battle gear, a half hour before. That’s when the briefing gets underway. All flight officers will be off at the briefing; and consequently, the large majority of the enlisted will be drinking, sleeping, or generally lying around because they too know where the officers are. It will be an ideal time to boost my Mi-24 from under the Soviet’s noses.”

“Do you really believe we can get away with it? America is so far away.”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“On timing and on a lot of good luck.” He reached under his jacket and brought out a small brown package. “Here, this is for you. A bit of good luck.”

“She hesitantly took it. What is it?”

He nodded at the package. “Open it.”

She tore open the paper and pulled out a turquoise scarf. “*Andrei,*” she beamed. “But why?”

“You deserve more than a tattered military-issue scarf. Besides, it accents your beautiful blue eyes and lovely blonde hair.”

Liana jumped up, nearly tipping the table, and gave him a big hug. “Thank you! It’s beautiful.” *You don’t know it, Love, but we’re going to be a family. Oh! Do you know I’m going to have your baby?*

While Liana pulled on her new scarf, Andrei paid for their meal. The instant they stepped out of the café the hairs on the nape of her neck bristled, and she shot to red alert. As they turned the corner, she jerked back at the site of the man standing before them. Grabbing Andrei’s sleeve, she blurted, “Oh, my Lord!”

“No, comrade Captain. You’re mistaken,” the man said. “Although I hold great power over your life, I am certainly not God.”

“What are you doing here?” Liana’s eyes narrowed.

“I might ask the same of you.”

“We’re on leave, comrade Major,” Andrei said. He stepped forward, partially blocking Liana in a protective stance. “And I’m sure you know this, given all the paperwork we had to wade through, as well as your two men who’ve been stalking us all day.” Andrei pointed toward the two plainclothes KGB officers, who now approached to within a few meters—hands at their sides, fists clenching, unclenching.

Zamiatin dismissed Andrei's comments with the wave of a hand and addressed Liana. "Are you enjoying your last leave before deployment?"

"We *were*," Liana said, "before you arrived." She glared at him. "*Again*, I ask, what are you doing here?"

"I'm the one who asks the questions, comrade Captain." Zamiatin, retrieved a pack of Sobranie cigarettes from his coat pocket and held it out. "Care for one, Captain Kamarova?"

She glanced at his outstretched hand and cringed, thinking of all the places on her body his hands had been. Her stomach lurched. "You know I don't smoke."

"Ah, yes I do. Just being polite." Zamiatin shook a cigarette out of its pack, lit it and blew a cloud of blue stench at Andrei. "Care for one, Captain?"

Andrei locked eyes with Zamiatin. "Major, what do you want with us? We're here legally. We've done nothing wrong. Now please stop harassing us."

Zamiatin attempted to wedge past Andrei and move directly in front of Liana, but Andrei countered, inserting himself between the two.

Liana nudged Andrei aside. "I can handle this."

She took a step toward Zamiatin. "Again, what do you want?" Glaring at him, heart pounding so hard in her chest, she was sure he could hear it. "Why are you here?"

"We have unfinished business."

"No. This is where you're mistaken. Our business is entirely finished; just as your Colonel had ordered you months ago. And if you don't stop harassing me, my command authority will see to it that your career is over." She pointed a finger at him. "And why must I keep telling you, I'm GRU intelligence. You have no authority over me."

"I assure you, comrade Captain," he took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled, "I have complete authority over you."

Andrei stepped forward. "You're a political officer, not a line officer. You have no investigative or arrest authority." He pointed a finger at Zamiatin. "And don't *ever* touch this woman again!"

The two KGB officers rushed forward, grabbing Andrei by the arms, jerking him away. Andrei lunged against their grip, but the men were as large as heavy-weight boxers and held firm. One pulled a Makarov pistol from his shoulder holster and shoved it in Andrei's gut.

Time slowed to a crawl and everyone stared at an old woman with gray hair who materialized in the middle of the melee. She pushed a hand out in front of her and pointed at each of the KGB agents, saying in broken Russian, "Let this man go and put that pistol away." They glanced at each

other with befuddled looks, but did as instructed. She then said to Zamiatin, “You are an evil man, and if you ever touch this woman again you will regret the day you were born.”

The *babushka* then turned to Andrei and said, “It’s all right young man. Ms. Kamarova will be fine. And it’s important to know that God has entrusted her into your care.”

Andrei blinked, not believing his eyes and ears. *Who is this old woman? And how can she take control of this situation with the wave of a hand? And care for Liana...? She’s a lethal weapon-system all by her little self.*

The woman gave Liana a knowing look, and Liana nodded, chewing her lower lip.

Zamiatin tossed his cigarette at the old woman’s feet, stepped to within inches of Liana and inhaled. “You smell as good as when I had you the first time. Maybe we should find a room. Or would you prefer an interrogation table.” His eyes were wild, and he smelled of stale fish.

His words burned like cyanide in her veins.

She hauled back and slugged him in the stomach. He doubled over, struggling to catch his breath. She knelt and held his gaze, her blue eyes now gray with rage. “You get that close or touch me again,” she hissed, “and your Colonel will have your rank bars on a plate and feed them to you until you choke.”

“You just crossed the line,” he blurted between breaths. “I ... I’m a KGB Major. I own you.”

“You’re a worthless parasite. And you’re going to rot in hell. Now get out of my sight.”

Zamiatin eased himself upright. “I know you and your friend are up to something and ... and I’m going to find out. You’ve not heard the last of me.” He turned and stalked off.

Vanya called after him, “Then, Major, I assure you, the next time we meet will be your last. You attempt to have your way with me again and only one of us will walk away. And it *won’t* be you.”

Vanya stepped over to the old woman. “I don’t understand what you just did or how you did it, or how you know so much about me, but thank you again.”

“I’m a prophet, young lady. I was born this way.” She reached out and took Liana’s hand, touching the ring on her finger. “You take care, dear one, and remember what I told you. Follow your heart.”

The ring grew warm—almost hot—on Liana’s finger. Her eyes grew wide and she grasped the ring with her other hand. “My destiny?”

“Yes, and when the time comes you will know, and you must reach out and appropriate your destiny. Understand, dear one?”

Liana shook her head. “I ... yes, I do.” She hugged the woman. “Yes. Yes I do.”

The old woman nodded toward Andrei and whispered in Liana’s ear, “This man will be the

father of your child.”

Liana grinned and whispered, “Yes. Yes. I know in my heart.”

The woman moved over to Andrei and said, “You know her name, young man. In fact, you’ve already chosen her name.”

“Whose *name*? Chosen *what*...?”

“In several months, you will understand. Now take good care of them.”

“*Them*...?”

“Mark my words, sir. You will soon understand.” She patted him on his chest. “Now, it’s time for you and your lady friend to be on your way.”

Andrei turned to Liana with a bewildered look, and grasped her hand. “I’ve got a thousand boogeymen playing on a trampoline in my mind. Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Liana winked at the old woman as they strolled past her.

After they had walked a block, Andrei stopped and turned to Liana. “What’s with that crazy *babushka*? Did she try to put a spell on me or something?”

Liana shrugged. “How should I know? She’s just a nice old lady.”

“Well, anyway ... you sure have one heck of a punch for a girl.”

Liana squinted at him. “You call me a girl again and you’re going to personally find out.”

“Duly noted. And what were you and that *babushka* whispering about?”

“About my future,” Liana grinned.

“Yeah, right. Did you really need to pick a fight with Zamiatin?”

“He started it.” She peered down at her ring. “And I’ll end it.”

“*Meow*. What a Lynx you are.”

She punched him in the arm. “You’re such a hooligan. Now let’s get out of here.”

As they made their way to the bus, they passed back through the bazaar and noticed the outdoor market was still in full swing. They strolled by a kiosk with a woman sitting on a rusted metal chair selling dogs, cats and a large bird.

Liana’s eyes locked on the exotic bird and she stopped. Tugging on Andrei’s arm, she said, “Oh, Andrei! Look at this beautiful bird. It’s magnificent. Wouldn’t you love to have one?”

Andrei ignored her, knelt and began petting a Hungarian Pointer resting at the woman’s feet.

Liana asked the woman, in Tajik, “What kind of bird is it?”

“A female African Gray parrot,” she replied.

"*Andrei*." Liana tugged on his jacket collar. "It's a parrot. I wonder if she speaks."

"It's a bird. Birds don't talk. They're too dumb." He continued petting the dog.

"*Andrei*," she scolded. Then she asked the woman and the woman shook her head yes.

Liana grinned and clapped her hands together. "*Andrei*, she talks."

"The woman?"

"The *bird*, you brick head. Talk to the parrot. Get her to say something."

He stood, regarding Liana and the parrot. "Not on your life."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I just don't care for birds ... unless they're in my dinner stew."

"It's not just any bird. It's a talking parrot. Don't be cruel."

"It's a Communist. It deserves the stew."

"*Andrei*! *You're* the Communist."

"I've seen the error of my ways. I'm ripping up my Party card the moment we defect. Besides, it's a known fact that parrots are Communists. They've all been personally trained by *Dzerzhinsky*, himself." *Andrei* referred to the father of the KGB, a ruthless, murdering tyrant.

Liana studied *Andrei* a moment. "What are you *talking* about? Are you *mad*?"

He thought about the African Gray he had given his ex-wife, Galina, years ago; thoughts that brought back memories of a love he once shared with her, a marriage that no longer existed. It also brought back dark thoughts of the stupid parrot ratting out his wife's love affair with an American diplomat: "*Sexxi Amierikanskii. Amierikanskii and Galina ... Sexxi.*"

And then Galina kicked him out.

End of marriage.

He scowled at the bird and the bird scowled back with intense little yellow eyes. *Andrei* shivered and turned to Liana. "Trust me. You do *not* want anything to do with this bird. It's a damn Marxist. The whole lot of them."

"*Andrei*, why are you talking such twaddle? She's just a beautiful, harmless bird."

"I'm telling you, young lady. You don't want to go there. Just pour some poison down its scrawny neck with that ring of yours and we'll be off."

"*Andrei Andreiovich*." She poked his chest. "That's so cruel."

The bird squawked then spoke in Tajik. "Hi! My name is Lorlii. Lorlii likes *naan*."

Andrei jumped back, tumbled over the dog, and fell to the ground on his butt. “What’d that damn bird say? Was that Tajik?”

“Yes, and she said you’re a nice man.”

“Don’t patronize me,” he said, standing. “That stupid bird doesn’t even know me. It probably just wants food.” He grasped Liana’s hand and tugged, saying, “Now let’s go, Vanya.”

Liana boosted her chin up, staring at him, eyes wide open. “Why did you call me *Vanya*? Why did you do that? Who’s *Vanya*?”

He blinked and rubbed his face. “I don’t know. Oh, that’s just really weird. I’m not sure what that’s all about. I don’t even know a Vanya. I mean, that’s just so very *creepy*. What do you think it means?”

Liana smiled inwardly, knowing now exactly what it meant. Their child would be named Vanya—a *gift from God*. And some day soon, Andrei would understand. She smiled. “I haven’t the faintest idea. So, what’s next, fly boy?”

Still shaking his head in bewilderment, he said, “Well, we have a flight to freedom to keep, and it doesn’t have room for a chatter box bird. Are you ready to start the next leg of our journey?” He held out his hand.

“Lead on, handsome. Lead on.”

Liana fell silent during their stroll to the bus, overcome with a dreadful foreboding. Who cares about talking birds and pretty scarves? They were petty distractions from the reality that faced her and Andrei. Could she leave the horrors of the past behind, or would she be haunted for the rest of her life? Did she believe they had a chance to defect to the west and a new life? Or would they die attempting the impossible? Freedom seemed not only improbable, but utterly unattainable.

She considered the ghastly Soviet-Afghan war. She might survive that. But the consequences of falling into Zamiatin’s grip again terrified her beyond belief. She could not die a second time. But then she smiled. The *Babushka* did say God would protect her, right? Yes, she must believe He will.

She held a hand to her abdomen. Would she really have Andrei’s baby? A little precocious redheaded, green-eyed girl? Vanya—*A gift from God*. She studied the brilliant Tajik sky, wanting to believe the old woman. But it all seemed so impossible: death, escape, freedom, rebirth, birth.

Oh, dear Lord, I want to believe.

Her head swam, and she was sure of one thing only at that very moment: she would follow her heart. And wherever it took her, it would be far enough.

It was her destiny after all.