

Prologue

Moscow, Russia. 9.27 pm.

Loud reports echoed off in the distance, startling Mikhail Popov. The old man's muscles stiffened. His gloved left hand formed a tight claw over his left knee. Tingles of electricity pulsed through the bony, fragile body shrouded by a long thick brown overcoat and a fluffy gray ushanka. Dull, enlightened eyes flashed with suspicion as he sorted through the faces milling around the Red Square. His chest quaked. The brittle ribs neared dilapidation as his heart hammered relentlessly. The blood in his vein fizzled with...*adrenaline? Fear? Panic? Confusion?*

He'd never had to feel this way before. NEVER.

Mikhail felt a light ripple of dizziness. His bony fingers formed tight fists in an attempt to fight back. He couldn't think of a time when he was so out of sorts. Maybe, it was old age. Or the acoustic mishmash of human and mechanical traffic.

But it was most probably the necessity of the package he had to deliver. And the perilous task of doing so within the borders of Moscow, where 'The Eye' fastidiously watched.

The cobblestoned ground of the Red Square was buried under inches of ice. Snowflakes floated in the air. A chilly wind blew in from the Moskva River, beating against the textile insulation everyone had on. The age-old lamps glowed defiantly, pushing their soft golden light into the gray night. The lights on the facade of the historical buildings surrounding the plaza lent a helping hand. People hung about in groups. The colorful facade of St. Basil towered across from him, its candy-looking onion domes as ostentatious as ever.

A few more of those loud reports forced his eyes to the sky. The drab, dark gray canvas went up in blushes of muffled light as firecrackers exploded. A million embers streaked flamboyantly across the sky like pixie-dust, blending with the snow drifting lazily in the air.

The murmur of traffic converged on him from all around. People turned their eyes to the sky in awe of the blitzkrieg of firework explosions. Eyes flashed with colors. Christmas songs wafted into the melee of explosions. A vehicular orchestra rolled in from the access

road cutting across the plaza to the Savior Gate. Laughter filled the air, competing with the drone of chatter. Skaters glided gleefully across the shiny sheets of ice.

Only a few feet away, a young mother tried to teach her child, six years of age at best, how to move on the ice. Mikhail's eyes feasted on those tiny little blades as they screeched on the ice, snorted and turned away.

His disdain for Christmas was stronger than the discomfort that'd engulfed him ever since he saw the mysterious note in his home.

But only just.

Reaching for the breast of his thick woolen overcoat, he touched the reassuring bulge underneath, and felt a shiver of satisfaction. He'd made the right choice. He had to have made the right choice. It felt like he was trying to find conviction for more than just his choice to flee to the Red Square. Like he was clinging desperately to a promise and hoped it would take him to the light. At least, for this once in his life.

At the moment, he was content with the fact that he was untouchable here. They wouldn't dare come for him. Not in the Red Square. With all those people. He felt safe. Yet, he couldn't resist a little homesickness. He could've been cooped up in the beanbag his goddaughter got him, chilling in front of the fireplace with a bottle of vodka, and the heat of the beloved spirit burning in his throat. But he was here, amidst all the noise, all these people, wondering what next.

Digging his hand into his overcoat, the glow from a phone's screen soon illuminated his small, round wrinkled face. It was a burner phone. His eyes narrowed as he peered intently at the screen. He'd forgotten his glasses, and the struggle to make out what he saw played out in the furrows on his brow. He made it to his call log...and had just punched the dial button on a number when one of the skaters bumped into him, throwing him to the ground.

Mikhail's heart skipped a beat.

A strong pair of arms latched onto him instantly, cushioning his fall. A string of heartfelt apologies followed quickly. Mikhail looked up into the bluest pair of eyes he'd ever seen.

And a chill ran up his spine.

There was something flinty and inhuman about those eyes. They carried a dryness that lanced right to the depths of his soul.

“Are you okay, old man?” The young, beautiful man asked in Russian. His voice was tinged with concern.

The old man muttered incoherently and was helped back to his feet.

“I’m so sorry,” the beautiful man continued. “I’m still learning the ropes. And with all these people out on the ice, it’s a little hard to make my way around.”

“Then, you should get a tutor,” Mikhail snapped, still furious from the fall.

“I’m truly sorry. Maybe you can be my tutor?”

The look in his eyes was innocent and genuine. Mikhail sighed. He was being paranoid. It was a mistake. Why did he have to take out his anxiety on the poor young man?

“I’m too old to teach anyone anything,” he replied. “Unless you want to learn how not to live your life when you’re at the end of it.”

The young man let out a chuckle, and Mikhail’s followed right after. The skater’s voice was deep, and his laughter came off like a rumble of thunder in his throat. Mikhail’s was feeble and scratchy. The difference in their years was a synecdoche for the history inlaid in the plaza.

“Take care of yourself, old man.” The blue-eyed stranger smoothed out Mikhail’s overcoat.

“Go learn how to skate before you take someone out to an early grave.”

The young man let out a laugh before turning away.

Mikhail’s eyes glistened dreamily as he watched the young man blend into the crowd and vanish. A faint smile hung on his frail, gossamer lips. Something about the man’s exuberance and carriage evoked a wave of nostalgia.

Absent-mindedly, Mikhail soothed a dull pinprick on his neck with his palm.

It persisted, spreading out with a singularity of purpose. A needle tearing through his vein. Still trapped in his daydream, worry lines crisscrossed the wrinkles on his face. His mind comfortably straddled both experiences.

He continued soothing the pinprick on his neck.

Instantly, his face went up in a rictus of agony.

Lips curled back, teeth bared, Mikhail's hands formed tight claws over his chest. His legs folded under him and he landed on his back. His eyes flashed with panic and raw, unbridled fear. Low, breathless sounds slipped out of his throat as he opened his mouth, but it was beaten down without stress by the din of activity in the square.

As Mikhail's vision slipped, his flailing mind thought back to the stranger, those pair of blue eyes.

And he knew.

He knew what had happened. How could he have been so stupid?

Now, those eyes would haunt him to his grave and even to the afterlife. His eyes pooled with tears as the muscles on his throat constricted. His mind ran through his life. His children, grandchildren, goddaughter...the package...what about the package...he was unable to give it to her...he had to get it to her...

Mikhail's eyes grew listless.

His lips stopped moving.

His body went still.

Right beside him, his phone's screen came alive—a phone call. It was the same person he'd called only moments ago. The ID did away with any concept of anonymity. It was bold, crystal, clear, and consisted of only two words.

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