

KGB



Mystery



In
High
Heels

Valentina Maltseva

KGB in High Heels

by
Valentina Maltseva



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I brought the gun closer. There was a safety, a breechblock, a cartridge clip. *How do I open it?* No idea. *The hell with it!* It was more important to determine if there were any live cartridges inside. With difficulty, I drew back the breechblock, amazed to see a bright yellow bullet flash by and slide into the breech.

I had live ammunition!

Suddenly, I felt a tremendous sense of relief.

“Well, are you coming out, or am I going to have to drag you out by your hair?” Victor thundered behind the door.

“I’m coming, boys.” I put the handgun into my right hand, and with my left quietly moved the door latch aside. “Just fixing my bra!”

I took a deep breath, clasped the gun with both hands and pushed the bathroom door open with my foot.

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KGB in High Heels

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To my sons

Moscow. Lubyanka. KGB of the USSR**Night of December 3-4 1977**

“How’s our protégé doing, Matvey?” Andropov plopped a big grape into his mouth, savoring its delicate texture.

“I’m not sure that she was the best choice, Yuri Vladimirovich.”

“Really?” Andropov shot a sidelong glance at his assistant. “Ten days ago you had a different opinion. You may sit down.”

Topolev nodded military-style, pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Any news from Argentina?” The KGB Chairman asked, changing the subject.

“The Baron will have to be replaced, he’s very ill.”

“No complications, I hope?”

“Unfortunately, Yuri Vladimirovich ...”

Andropov raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Your protégé suddenly came to his suite and called the police. However, so far everything is all right.”

“So far?”

“It’ll be cleared up tomorrow, or maybe even today. Anyway, our diplomats stepped in and she was released.”

“Smart girl.” Andropov nipped off another grape. “Take care, Topolev, we must avoid a scandal at any cost. At least for now.”

“Maybe it's for the better, Yuri Vladimirovich? She's already under the police scrutiny; imagine how much worse it would look if she's accused of Geskin's murder.”

“Well ...” Andropov wiped his lips with a napkin and threw it into the wastebasket. “We're playing with fire. Let's make sure that we don't miss the mark this late in the game.”

“We won't. Everything's been double-checked.”

“And Costa?”

Topolev didn't reply.

“What's troubling you, Matvey? Speak up.”

“Upon coming back to Bogotá he went directly to his estate and hasn't been seen in Congress since.”

“That's only natural. He's crushed. He has to get accustomed to his new future.”

“He's stronger than he appears.”

“He's got no trump cards.”

“He's got character.”

“Matvey, you're worrying me,” Andropov took off his glasses and began to polish them with a chamois cloth. “Costa's one of the main players in this game. If we fail now, we risk ruining the entire operation. Everything's been carefully planned, down to the smallest detail. All possible scenarios have been analyzed. His behavior is consistent with our

plan: arrogance, distrust, fear, submission. What else do we need?"

"Yuri Vladimirovich, I don't have a logical answer. All I have is a hunch, a feeling. I can't explain it; it's like a bad vibe ... I'm sorry that I can't be any more specific."

"Seventy million dollars will be in his hands any day now, Matvey!" The KGB Chairman exclaimed in a grating tone, betraying his irritation. "And if this money goes to waste, I hope that we have a better explanation than your intuition, for both of our sakes. Let's go over the plan one more time, what are the weak points?"

"There aren't any, Yuri Vladimirovich."

"Ilario Costa?"

"No doubts. Absolute loyalty."

"Information on Costa's position in Congress?"

"Extensive. The most trusted sources. The slightest changes are monitored."

"Our people in Colombia?"

"All set."

"In Argentina?"

"Everything is OK."

"Who'll replace the Baron?"

"Two candidates, Yuri Vladimirovich, it's your choice."

"Choose yourself. How are things in the neighboring countries?"

"Everything's going according to the plan."

“So, our only liability is your intuition...” Andropov rubbed his nose and put his glasses back on. “Do you think that Costa, being a very strong individual, will recover from his shock and make a full confession to the Colombian counter-intelligence, thus destroying his political career? Is that it, Matvey?”

“Pretty much, Yuri Vladimirovich, but if you think that these assumptions are unfounded,”

“If I did, I'd have gone home to sleep, instead of chatting here with you. It's two in the morning, for God's sake!”

“Yuri Vladimirovich, I think we should test him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, call it a dress rehearsal. Let's eradicate the element of risk, try Costa in action. A small assignment would take two months at most. If he goes through with it, we're in the clear. If not, then ...”

“Then what?”

“We can find a substitute.”

“How much time would it take to find someone new, if testing Costa takes two months?”

“It's hard to say right now.”

“Then listen carefully, because it seems like you've got your head up your ass!” Andropov turned to Matvey abruptly. “This operation took two years. *Two years*, Mr. Analytical

Genius! And a hell of a lot of money! And just when everything is finally ready,” Andropov pulled at another grape with such a force that the delicate fruit exploded. He wiped his fingers squeamishly and continued. “Just then, Colonel Topolev suggests that we suspend the maneuvers, abort the action that has already started in Argentina, and begin experimenting. Do you understand what this means in our situation? Or are you unaware that accountability exists even at the very top? Eventually, I’ll have to show tangible results. What if Costa fails, what am I supposed to show then? Do you understand the scope of what we’ve planned? Czechoslovakia or even Budapest doesn’t even come close in magnitude to the coup d’état in Latin America! Do you think it was easy for me to get those millions? Especially after that imbecile Allende decided he was a new Churchill and ruined everything that took billions to build? If we fail, if the red banner of Socialism doesn’t rise over Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, the old Politburo bastards will force me into early retirement.”

Silence settled over the office. Topolev, having a thorough understanding of his boss’s personality, realized two things: first - Andropov was extremely annoyed, and second, his evaluation of the situation was accurate. The Gambit, as the Colombian operation was known, was Andropov's pet

project, his first full-scale action, which if accomplished successfully, was going to strengthen his position in the government even further.

Andropov's participation in the bloody events of 1956, when he was the Soviet ambassador in Hungary, had earned him a reputation of an astute politician, who could connect certain crucial links of a given chain. But nobody thought of him as a strategist who could develop and implement a full-scale coup d'état. The Gambit was his chance to prove otherwise, his first chance since the excruciating failure in Chili in 1973.

If he succeeded now, the unsteady balance of power in the Politburo would shift dramatically in his favor. The elderly heads of the Party valued nothing but power and struggled for nothing but influence. And who would dare question the power and the influence of a man who could place an entire country on the altar of Socialism, not to mention three, with tremendous deposits of uranium, platinum and diamonds, a powerful mineral industry, and strategic gateways to the Pacific? The glory of Cortez haunted Andropov day and night.

Topolev realized the mistake he had made by expressing doubt in the success of a thoroughly planned operation. He had overestimated Andropov's fondness of him and on an impulse of eagerness, overstepped

the dangerous line separating a political intelligence officer and a leader of a Superpower.

The fact that Andropov had suddenly stopped talking and sat staring at the ceiling, made Topolev ill at ease. *I could be demoted on the spot*, he thought, wiping his damp forehead with a handkerchief. To preempt Andropov's possible strike, Topolev decided to improvise, which he always did when cornered. He only had time for one fleeting thought that if he failed now, it would mean an end of his brilliant career.

"Yuri Vladimirovich, I have an idea."

"Well?" grumbled Andropov still not looking at him.

"We can minimize the chance of Costa's ruining our plans."

"You still believe that there is a chance?"

"Yes," Matvey answered firmly, knowing perfectly that Andropov valued consistency in his employees most of all. "But I think I know how we can diffuse the situation. If we assume that Costa has thoughts of bailing out, then we must make him feel our presence day and night and make him understand that we are watching him. That should put an end to all of his unhealthy emotions."

"So what do you suggest? That we use all of our Colombian agents to spy on Costa and risk exposing them?"

“Our people will have nothing to do with that. There are at least thirty private detective agencies in Bogotá alone. Suppose our informer hires a detective to keep an eye on a respected Congressman, who, he suspects, is having a secret love affair with his wife. Sounds like an ordinary situation in Latin America. But Costa, after our meeting at the airport, will have only one explanation for this surveillance. He’ll get the point.”

“Why do you think Costa will even notice the tailing?”

“Our person will hire hacks – amateurs, who only pretend to be pros. I have an idea of how they work. I assure you, Yuri Vladimirovich, Costa will notice right away.”

“And what if Costa puts the screws on that loser and demands to know why he is spying on him?”

“First of all, he probably won't do that, he would be too afraid of a scandal. And secondly, even if he does, the man will just tell him the truth: a client suspects that the respected Congressman is having an affair with his wife. The more stupid and fake an explanation sounds, the more it'll convince Costa that we're watching his every move. Don't you think so, Yuri Vladimirovich?”

Andropov was silent for some time. Then, still gazing at the ceiling, he said:

“Contact Bogotá today, and give the necessary instructions. Keep it under your

personal control. If anything happens, inform me immediately. You may go now.”

Buenos Aires. Plaza Hotel**December 4, 1977**

In the morning, my telephone was singing its peppy tune again.

“Yes,” I exhaled hoarsely, having lifted the receiver after the fifth ring.

“Señorita Maltseff?” inquired the high-pitched male voice.

“Señorita Maltseff is dead,” I replied, still asleep. “The funeral will be after dinner.”

I hung up and buried my head in the pillow, hoping to get back to a wonderful dream: Vityanya Mishin, blindfolded with his French tie, was standing in his underwear in front of a brick wall covered with graffiti. There was an accompanying drum-roll and the clacking of a dozen rifle safeties. A Captain’s voice called out, “In the name of the Argentinean Soviet Socialist Republic ...”

I was adept at resuming interrupted dreams. This time was no exception, and I quickly conjured up my vision of Mishin. He was pale; the drum-roll was getting louder, and the Captain’s voice droned on. Suddenly Vityanya tore off the tie and shouted: “I didn’t steal those napkins from the table! Why don’t you believe me?” An invisible someone commanded: “Fire!” But instead of the rat-

tat-tat of rifle fire, all I heard was a pathetic purr. The phone was ringing again.

“Yes!” I growled, realizing that I wouldn't be able to finish watching that beautiful dream after all.

“I'm sorry, Señorita Maltseff,” said the same voice. “I've checked my Russian-Spanish dictionary and, sorry again, I still didn't understand a word.”

“Who is this?”

“Sergeant Jorge Valdes, Buenos Aires central police station. If you remember, yesterday...”

“I do. What do you want?”

“Commissioner Garrets...”

“He's not here. I don't sleep with men who are shorter than five feet! Any other questions?”

“No. I mean yes. You've got it all wrong, Señorita,” Jorge had apparently reached the limit of his intellectual ability. “Commissioner Garrets wants me to tell you that he would like to meet with you. If the Señorita doesn't mind, of course.”

“Señoritadoes mind and Señoritais quite cranky!” I snarled. “I have nothing to say to your Commissioner! And how dare you wake me up so early?”

“I'm sorry, Señorita ...”

A sudden thought struck me. I shivered.

“Hey, Jorge!”

“Yes, I'm here, Señorita.”

“Where does he want to meet with me?”

“Any place convenient to you, Señorita.”

I looked at my watch. It was several minutes past seven. Lectures at the symposium would commence at ten, maybe ten-thirty. I had more than enough time to meet with the Commissioner. But how could I arrange it if every one of my moves was scrutinized? Only a complete fool would think that she could come and go unnoticed after all that's happened. I remembered the microphone on Mishin's lapel. *What if the phone was being tapped as well?* The thought made me sick.

“Hello, Señorita!” Jorge's voice became anxious. “Are you there? Can you hear me? Hello!”

“Where did you learn Russian, Jorge?” I was asking without a real purpose, just to buy some time. A plan was forming in my mind. To implement it, however, I had to see Garrets and keep the meeting secret from Vityanya and his colleagues.

“Oh, Señorita, it's a long story. The fact is ...”

“Can you make it short?”

“My mom's from Byelorussia.”

“Really? And your dad?”

“He's from Poland. He lived there before the war and then in 1939, when it all ...”

“I understand, Jorge, I studied history at the University. What language did your parents speak at home?”

“Polish and ...” Jorge faltered.

“And?”

“And Yiddish.”

“So you're a Jew, Jorge?” I shifted to Yiddish immediately.

“You too, Señorita?” Jorge was so stunned that he answered in Spanish. One would think that I'd just confessed to being his long lost sister.

“Calm down, Jorge, for God's sake! Tell me, do you speak Yiddish?”

“Abisale ...”

“Great!” I was feverishly reviewing my options. Let's assume the worst, my phone is being tapped. I was willing to bet that Vityanya didn't speak Yiddish. Even if they did understand that I'd arranged something with Jorge, they'd need time to find someone who spoke Yiddish, get them to listen to the recording, and translate it. I had about a half an hour at my disposal. I wouldn't need more than that.

“Listen, Jorge,” I said in Yiddish, trying to pronounce the words distinctly and clearly. “You must understand what I'm going to tell you now. If you don't get something, stop me and I will say it in a different way. Do you understand, Jorge?”

“Yes, Señorita.”

“Then tell your master that ...”

“Pardon me, Señorita ...”

“Something you don’t understand?”

“Yes, Señorita.”

“The word ‘master’?”

“Yes, Señorita.”

“Tell your friend—”

“Which one, Señorita?”

“Jorge, you're a very stupid boy.”

“I know, Señorita. My Mom tells me all the time.”

Your mother is a clever woman. I thought for a second. “Do you know who wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes, Señorita.”

“Tell this man I agree.”

“A-ah! Now I get it.”

“Thank God! I'll be ready in twenty minutes. But I don't want anyone to see me. Do you understand?”

“Not quite, Señorita.”

“Oh God!”

“You're afraid of someone, Señorita, yes?”

“At least you understand that much.”

“And you want ...” Jorge stopped, searching for the right words. “You want to talk to him in your room?”

“No, that is out of the question. It's dangerous.”

“You want to disappear, right?”

“Yes, but for a half-hour at the most. Just to talk to your boss.”

“I have understood everything, Señorita.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Don’t go anywhere, Señorita. In twenty minutes I will knock on your door.”

“How do I know it's you?”

“It’ll be me, Señorita,” Jorge's voice suddenly got warmer. “I will speak ... our language.”

God, I thought to myself. Why do Jews appear in my life only when I'm in trouble?

Twenty minutes were barely enough to take a shower, put several strokes of make-up on my face, get dressed and throw the manuscript, a notebook, and some other stuff into my bag. At one particular moment, I decided I was never going to return to that room. But it would’ve been stupid to start packing. Besides, I didn’t have time for that.

In twenty minutes, I heard a gentle knock at the door.

“Who's there?”

“It's me,” Jorge had a good memory. He answered in Yiddish.

I opened the door. Jorge looked dazzling in a white waiter's uniform, pushing a chromium-plated cart laden with covered silver dishes. I opened my mouth to speak but he put a finger to his lips expressively. Then, after looking around and making sure there was no one in the hallway, he spread the white curtains that covered the lower tier of

the cart. I understood immediately and dove into the prepared space.

“Make yourself comfortable, Señorita.” Jorge whispered in Russian. “You’ll have to endure this for about ten minutes.”

Had I not requested such precautions myself, the offer could’ve been considered pure abuse. The cart wasn’t fit to transport humans. It was cramped and uncomfortable. My knees were up against my chin, my head kept bumping into the upper tier of the cart, and my tailbone ached and itched. Besides, I desperately wanted to cough, sneeze and blow my nose. Still, I was truly happy because for the first time in the last ten crazy days, I was acting independently.

By the tiny jolts and rustling of the rubber-coated wheels, I tried to track our route, calculating that first, we entered the elevator, then rolled across the marble floor of the lobby, then entered another elevator, and finally, the cart rattled over some kind of stone tiles.

“We’ve arrived, Señorita, come out!” Jorge bent down, gave me a hand and literally dragged me out of the cart because most of my body was numb.

Judging by an impressive number of cars and the moist smell, we were in the hotel’s underground parking lot. Jorge swiftly took off his white jacket, starched shirt, and bow tie, but kept the dark-colored trousers with

satin stripes. He tossed his fancy dress into the back seat of a shabby Chevy and pulled out a multicolored cowboy shirt. While he was changing, I noted that his body was much better than his Yiddish.

“You’ll have to suffer just a bit longer, Señorita,” Jorge smiled shyly and unlocked the trunk of his Chevrolet. “Only about ten more minutes for total security. Please go ahead, Señorita!”

He offered me his hand as gallantly as if helping me into the back of a luxurious stretch limo instead of a filthy trunk. Once I was safely inside, he slammed the lid shut. In terms of living space, the trunk was much better than the restaurant cart's lower tier. But it stank unbearably of gas and dirty rags.

“Jorge, have you ever driven a live human being in this tin can or just dead ones?”

I was sure that Jorge couldn’t hear me and was very surprised when the Argentinean's calm voice replied from somewhere behind my back, “I have, Señorita. I once transported a criminal in there. He was hanged later on, though.”

Buenos Aires. Safe house**December 4, 1977**

The ride didn't last long, and we didn't leave town because the car never bounced over a pothole. Either good roads were truly one of the noticeable advantages of the free world, or Jorge deliberately chose the best ones in an attempt to make my trip easier.

Despite of the Chevy's bedraggled appearance, its engine worked quietly and smoothly, like a trained athlete's heart. Had it not been for the plethora of horrible smells, I could've even said that I rode in comfort. When Jorge opened the trunk, I was forced to shut my eyes to keep the rays of the rising sun from blinding me. Effortlessly, Jorge pulled me out of the trunk and set me on my feet. I looked around.

We arrived in the front yard of a villa, surrounded by tall trees and hedges with exotic flowers. Our Chevy and a Volkswagen Beetle convertible were parked on a small paved lot, glistening in the sun. Apparently, the three-story villa had been designed by several people, resulting in an architectural nightmare. It had Gothic towers, Dorian pillars, baroque stucco moldings, and narrow Moorish lancet windows.

“Jorge, if you tell me that this villa belongs to Commissioner Garrets I'll be very surprised.”

“Oh no,” Jorge looked puzzled. “Commissioner Garrets isn't rich. No Argentinean policeman is. I have no idea whose house this is. I was only given the address. Let's go, Señorita, they're expecting us.”

We passed a small lobby, where I noticed a huge lithograph of the Crucifixion, then entered a sitting room that looked like a furniture warehouse. My eyes roamed over sofas, ottomans, chairs, tables, settees, and some ludicrous footrests, so it wasn't my fault that amidst this hodgepodge, I failed to see Garrets. The Commissioner was simply lost in the depths of his gigantic armchair upholstered in cheerful chintz. However, I immediately noticed another person - a tall, middle-aged, broad-shouldered man. He stood near a mantelpiece and stepped forward when he saw Jorge and me enter.

“Welcome, Señorita Maltseva!” he spoke French in a resonant, low-pitched voice. “Your trip wasn't too exhausting, I hope?”

“Oh, not at all! There's nothing more invigorative than a ride in a trunk of a car, which leaks gas, and hasn't seen a carwash in over a decade.”

“Well,” the stranger shrugged in sympathy. “You’re the only one to blame for all that inconvenience. Please take a seat.”

As far as I could tell, his French was very good. I chose a small couch and sat down.

“Well?” asked the stranger.

“Well?” I repeated mechanically.

“You wanted to talk, right?”

“Yes...” I spent several seconds constructing the next phrase: “But, excuse me, not with you, monsieur.”

Garrets uttered something. I glanced helplessly at Jorge who was still standing at the entrance. The boy timidly dropped his eyes.

“Commissioner Garrets has just done the honor of introducing me to you,” said the stranger.

“Really? It’s a pity I didn’t understand a word.”

“It’s OK,” he smiled evenly, brightening his motionless face. He had striking blue eyes and could even be considered charming. The stranger said a few words to Jorge, after which my young interpreter bowed awkwardly and disappeared.

“Well, Señorita Maltseva, I doubt that you would remember my last name. My first name, however, is short and easy — Ray.”

“Easy enough,” I agreed. “Although, it doesn’t sound very Spanish.”

“I'm afraid that discussing name origins would take too much time.” Ray exchanged expressive glances with Garrets. The little man climbed out of the armchair with difficulty, spat a cigar's end into a heavy iron ashtray and left without even saying goodbye. “And we don't have much of it, do we, Señorita Maltseva?”

“Who are you, Mr. Ray?”

“Just a man,” answered Ray taking a seat in front of me, “who can help you. The way I understand it, you got yourself into a jam and don't know how to get out of it.”

“What are you, clairvoyant?”

“No, I'm in the secret service.”

“That's almost the same,” I said as if I had thirty years of spying experience under my belt.

“Where is it the same? In the KGB?”

“Don't you work for them?”

“You had something to say to Garrets, is that correct?”

“Sure, but what makes you think that I have something to say to you?”

“Because your problems are out of the jurisdiction of the Argentinean police.”

“Whose jurisdiction are they under?”

“Espionage and counter-espionage.”

“Thanks for the legal advice. So, now you figured I should trust you implicitly, is that it?”

“OK, don't trust me implicitly,” grinning, Ray lit up a long black cigar. “Trust me within certain limits.”

“What limits?”

“Ethical limits, Señorita Maltseva. I'm only interested in specific issues concerning national security.”

“In Russia we say ‘state security’.”

“They're synonyms.”

“Not always.”

“I think we should finish with the introduction, it's gone on long enough.”

The heavy grandfather clock showed ten minutes to nine.

“I don't know where to start.”

“Let me help you.” Ray stood up. “You don't have to tell me about Baron Geskin. We knew him very well. But how did you meet him? How were you connected? What do you know about his death?”

Ray's questions cut to the point. I had to answer. But for some reason I didn't want to. I knew nothing about this man. I realized that once I started talking I would have to bare my soul, and the picture wouldn't be pretty. The very thought of this man learning about the details of my recruitment, my private contacts with the KGB operatives, and the particulars of my mission, seemed rather disgusting at the moment. It made no difference to me whether to serve my time in the Argentinean jail, or the Siberian gulag. And even if I *was*

interested in security, it wasn't the national or the state kind, I only cared about my personal well-being.

"Which country do you represent, Ray?"

"No comment," he replied stiffly.

"Do you have a rank?"

"No comment."

"Do you have any children?"

"Why does it matter?"

"You see," I said, "yet you insist on questioning me, and only because I was stupid enough to turn to the police for help. I stress that: to the *police*, not to the secret service of some unknown country. I have information that could shed some light on the death of Sir Gerald Geskin, whom I met three days ago. That's all, Mr. Ray."

"Just like that," he smirked. "You just decided to help the police? Pure selflessness, was it?"

"I didn't say that, so please don't twist my words. That's merely your interpretation. It just so happens, that Geskin's death raises the question of my involvement. Naturally, I didn't kill him. I can prove it."

"Are you sure?"

I felt woozy.

"Yes. Because, I believe that I know who did. If you're interested, I can provide the information. But not without compensation; only in exchange for a guarantee of my safety. Is that clear enough?"

“Yes,” Ray put out the cigar and immediately drew a new one from a leather case. “I think I understand you very well. You, Señorita Maltseva, want to use me to serve your own needs. Your plan is simple: you conceal the information that portrays you unfavorably and offer us information only if it’s harmless to you. Right?”

“More or less.”

“That won't work!”

“Why?”

“That strategy might work with a police Commissioner, but not with an intelligence officer.”

“So let's get Garrets back in here.”

“Unfortunately that won't work either.” Ray exhaled a gray ring of smoke that rose to the molded ceiling. “As of yesterday the police are no longer on this case. Furthermore, we are the ones who Jorge contacted this morning. I personally worked out your escape plan from the Plaza. And the villa, where we are having this pleasant conversation, is *our* safe house. Do you understand? You were under surveillance all day long yesterday.”

“So what? So, you studied my features while I was in the bathroom.”

Ray took several pictures from the inside pocket of his jacket and threw them carelessly into my lap. There were five pictures of Vityanya and me at the Plaza bar. The shots were professional, well focused, and taken

from one vantage point. A single idiotic thought suddenly flitted through my mind, Vityanya and I looked very nice together.

“And here’s the soundtrack,” Ray put a small black tape player on the table and pushed a silver button, “to make the review of the photos more entertaining.”

Against a muted background of hissing and distant prattle, I heard Vityanya's voice. It was as close as if he and not Ray were sitting in the armchair in front of me and chain-smoking black cigars: “...Now let’s get back to the important topics.”

“You do smell good, though, you bastard. Too good for a vermin like you, Vityanya. What’s your cologne called, anyway?”

“Red Moscow.”

Ray turned the tape off.

“If you recall yesterday's conversation with this man, Señorita Maltseva, you will understand how much we know. So let's not waste time. For your sake.”

I was defeated. Crushed.

And Ray, sensing my weakness, began his attack.

“What’s the name of the man on the picture?” Ray's voice grew dry and busy. He pushed the record button on the tape recorder and shoved it closer to me.

“Mishin. Victor Mishin.”

“Is he Russian?”

“Yes.”

“Does he work for the KGB?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his rank?”

“I don't know.”

“During your conversation you called him Meltzer. Kurt Meltzer.”

“He’d asked me to call him that.”

“Have you seen his papers?”

“No.”

“Does this Mishin-Meltzer speak Spanish?”

“No... I'm not sure. He doesn't, as far as I know.”

“During the conversation in the bar you told Mishin-Meltzer that he was the one who killed Geskin. Why did you think so?”

“I can’t give a brief reply to that.”

“Give a longwinded one.”

“The scent of Mishin's cologne. It was the same as the one in the living room of Geskin's suite.”

“Are you employed by the KGB?”

“No.”

“Are you here on a KGB assignment?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“I am to pass a manuscript written by a Soviet dissident to Professor Televano.”

“Why?”

“I don't know.”

“When?”

“Today. Between the lectures.”

“Then what?”

“I don't know. That's all they told me.”

“How long have you been collaborating with the KGB?”

“Less than two weeks.”

“Is this relationship voluntary?”

“No.”

“Have you been forced into it?”

“Yes.”

“Were you blackmailed?”

“Yes.”

“Was your acquaintance with the Baron accidental?”

“No.”

“Was it a part of some plan?”

“Yes.”

“Which one?”

“I don't know. I really don't.”

“Did you have sexual relations with him?”

“No.”

“Did he know about your connection to the KGB?”

“I don't think so. At least, not in the beginning.”

“Did he tell you about his role in the KGB?”

“No.”

“What did they tell you about Geskin in Moscow?”

“That he was a rich eccentric, a lover of literature and the owner of an enormous library. That I had to get acquainted with him.”

“Who recruited you?”

“Andropov.”

“The Chairman of the KGB?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, I'll change the tape.” Ray fumbled around for a new reel. It was surprisingly small. I was still being attacked by idiotic thoughts. As Ray was loading the tape recorder, I thought that this device would be very useful in the future for taking interviews. *Moron*, I did a mental reality check, *what interviews?! You're two steps away from jail!*

“Let's continue,” Ray's voice brought me back from my reverie. “We have about ten more minutes to go. So,” he pushed the button again, “at the end of the conversation Mishin-Meltzer wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to you. Where is that paper?”

“I have it.”

“What did he write?”

“His phone number.”

“Did he offer it to you?”

“No, I asked for it.”

“Why?”

“To contact him if necessary.”

“Didn't he give you his address?”

“God, I'm not that stupid!” Vityanya's painfully familiar voice suddenly boomed from somewhere near the fireplace.

Buenos Aires. Safe house.**December 4, 1977**

Mishin, elegant as usual and reeking of Drakkar, made two steps toward us. He had a gun in his hand.

“I suggest, Mr. Beardsley that you put your hands up very slowly,” he said without raising his voice. “And please be advised that your head is in the crosshairs of my friend’s optical sight. He’s out in the garden. He’s got nerves of steel and was trained by ruthless instructors. He never makes mistakes. On top of that, his father made quite a name for himself in the Battle of Stalingrad during the war. Don’t underestimate genetics.”

Ray froze. Mishin walked around, expertly thrust his hand under my interrogator’s jacket, and pulled out a big black handgun with a nickel-plated handle.

“Splendid!” He exclaimed in a tone of a barber who’d just finished a perfect haircut. “I’m sorry Mr. Beardsley, but now you’ll have to leave us. Please don’t take it personally; it’s all part of our job.”

I felt Ray strain, like a tiger before a leap. Even his fingers turned to stone. But Victor didn’t wait for him to spring. I heard a shot, and then another one.

I screamed. Mishin was beside me in one stride. I felt a shattering slap in the face and crashed painfully against something hard. The last thing I remembered was seeing Ray's unnatural pose on the floor and Victor extracting the tiny cassette from of the tape recorder.

I dreamt that I gave birth to a baby. It was red like a pepper husk and very noisy. It was born in the editorial office, in my department, and all the staff came running upon hearing the cries of my first-born. The Editor bent over my desk where the baby lay wiggling its wrinkled little feet. For some reason, the Editor touched its neck with the tip of his finger, then turned and announced to everyone who was there:

"You understand that I can't conceal this. I'll have to report it to the Bureau of the Central Committee."

"But you haven't prepared a proper report!" objected a voice from behind me.

"We still have about twenty minutes."

"Well, maybe.... And what shall we do with this?" Nyusya, our watch-woman, asked pointing at the baby.

"Put it into a sack, what else?"

As I yelled, I felt a giant hand, smelling of expensive soap, cover my entire face and ears.

I opened my eyes. Through the cracks between huge fingers, I noticed Victor standing a few feet away.

“Leave her alone,” he ordered. “Our secret weapon has regained consciousness, I believe.”

The owner of the giant hand stepped aside so I could clearly see an expressive face, arched eyebrows, huge eagle-like nose, and tiny gray eyes partly hidden behind the citadel of bushy eyelashes.

“Howdy, Maltseva!” Victor grinned and looked at his watch. “You’re gaining criminal experience about as fast as your American friend over there is acquiring rigor mortis. Are you pleased, my dear? Didn’t I warn you, that I wanted none of your tricks? Do you realize to whom you just spilled the beans? Take a look at him, it’s your last chance. His name is Ray Beardsley, the head of the CIA’s Argentinean Headquarters. He’s our enemy, do you understand? And you just sold me out — me, your school friend and fellow citizen — to the enemy! Why? Because you’re not really Russian, Maltseva. People like you were burned in Auschwitz like garbage. If I had permission, I would gladly douse you and this lousy house with gasoline and strike a match right now. But I still need you, so quickly, march to the bathroom and freshen up. You have three minutes. Move!”

“Well?!” the thick-eye browed man jerked me up to my feet.

Obediently, I made my way to the bathroom and turned on the water. “She’s

locked the door from the inside,” I heard the Neanderthal’s deep voice.

“It doesn’t matter, there’s no window,” Victor replied calmly. “Let her fix herself up a bit, she looks like a scarecrow. In the meantime, carry him upstairs. There is a wardrobe in the bedroom. Stuff him in there and come back.”

“Got it.”

“Oh, and take a look around up there.”

“Sure thing.”

Propping myself at on the edge of the tub, I kicked off my shoes, wrapped my arms around my body, and silently sobbed. I felt like a guest at my own funeral, a sensation I wouldn’t wish upon my worst enemy. It seemed that the witty, independent, and attractive Valentina Maltseva I knew died ten days ago, melted away in a toxic mix of cruelty, treachery, and coercion. In her place was just a shell of a woman, her soul adrift, and her body in survival mode, desperately wishing to escape the clutches of the brutal beasts.

My self-preservation instinct finally took over as I looked around the bathroom at a huge mirror, malachite color bathtub, white cabinets, and yellow toilet, sink, and bidet, realizing that there was something very unusual here. Any woman can quickly determine who’s been using a bathroom and more importantly, who hasn’t. The strange

thing about this luxurious bathroom was that it smelled only of men. There wasn't a single feminine item in it, which meant...

"Come on, Valentina." I heard Victor's voice from behind the door.

"Why don't you set up a perimeter defense, while I'm in here?" I tried to sound carefree. "Doesn't a girl have a right to wash her face?"

"You moron! We're short on time." Mishin raised his voice. "His cowboys could show up any minute, and they'll shoot first and ask questions later. It's time we get out of here!"

"Just three more minutes, Vityanya!"

"Sixty seconds. Then I'm breaking down the door."

Later I couldn't remember what guided me, whether it was just fear or a sudden realization. I hurriedly brushed my hair and rummaging through the cabinets, shelves and ledges. Bits of ideas, thoughts, and half-forgotten detective stories swung back and forth in my mind like vines in an impassable jungle. CIA headquarters... safe house... a bathroom never visited by a woman.

This bathroom reminded me of a comfortable prison cell. What was I looking for? I honestly didn't know. Like an amateur electrician, dumbfounded by the unfamiliar web of colored cables, I fumbled around, hoping that by some miracle two random broken ends might create a current or a spark.

The cabinets were almost empty. A tube of toothpaste, a bottle filled with medicine, a dirty shaving brush, a razor with a rusty blade, deodorant, several rolls of toilet paper, magazines with naked girls...

“Valentina!” Mishin’s shout left no time for further searching.

“I’m coming.”

I sighed, turned off the tap, squatted down to adjust the back of my shoe and... There it was, at last! I saw something black under the tub. I reached, felt an angular object, and tugged it toward me. After a quick snap of adhesive tape, there it was — a small handgun. Despite the stress, lack of time, and two professional killers impatiently waiting for me on the other side of the door, I paused to admire it. It was a thing of beauty, an elegant piece that fit into my hand as if made especially for me.

Like all Moscow State University students, I was familiar with the mechanics of a firearm. I’d even been to the University shooting range, squealing every time the gun recoiled. During our mandatory military classes, we had to take apart and reassemble a Kalashnikov repeatedly. Back then, we thought that our military professor Ivan Alekseyevich Zvyagin, a retired Colonel and a pathological alcoholic, was an imbecile. He drilled war tactics into us, sugared with inane bits of military wisdom, such as, “a man

should be preparing for a nuclear war even when in bed with his wife.” But as it turned out, his instructions were not so dumb after all. Ten years passed and I still remembered everything.

Forgive me, Ivan Alekseyevich, I thought, if I ever see you again, I'll cover you with kisses. That is, if you haven't kicked the bucket yet from all the cheap port.

I brought the gun closer. There was a safety, a breechblock, a cartridge clip. *How do I open it?* No idea. *The hell with it!* It was more important to determine if there were any live cartridges inside. With difficulty, I drew back the breechblock, amazed to see a bright yellow bullet flash by and slide into the breech.

I had live ammunition!

Suddenly, I felt a tremendous sense of relief.

“Well, are you coming out, or am I going to have to drag you out by your hair?” Victor thundered behind the door.

“I'm coming, boys.” I put the handgun into my right hand, and with my left quietly moved the door latch aside. “Just fixing my bra!”