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Prologue

*Russia**August 19, 1991*

THE ELEVATOR GROUND NOISILY AS IT DECELERATED, bouncing a few times before it stopped on the third floor. The door opened and a wall of cool, damp air instantly thrust onto the short, stocky woman, an envelope clenched tightly in her hand. She crowded her neck forward and peered down the poorly illuminated corridor, a place she had never before visited.

The thunder crackled outside and tumbled down to her end of the hallway, followed by the more docile sound of rain. She took a deep breath before taking her next step. The floor appeared abandoned, and for a moment she wished her colleagues had just pulled a joke on her. But she knew better.

Doctor Vadenko, the name echoed in her head. *He must be here, somewhere.* She had heard strange things about the *Zapretnaya Zona*, the forbidden area. It had been the topic of wild rumor since she had arrived here from nursing school. It was the dominion of a handful of weird doctors and a couple of reclusive nurses, both of whom had left, so she had heard.

I'm here to deliver this and that's all, she told herself as if to feel reassured that her visit would be brief. She stepped out of the elevator. Strangely, the air didn't have the usual odor of ammonia-based disinfectants that permeated the rest of the building.

The blue tile floor was cracked and faded, exposing the aged concrete below that made a gritty sound with

every step she took. She followed the single row of yard-long incandescent lights that ran the length of the hallway. Some bulbs were lit but filthy, others were extinguished.

The skin on her exposed calves and arms shivered, and the warmth in her chest was quickly dissipating. The temperature had dropped by several degrees in the thirty paces since she had left the elevator. It was even colder than the outside air the last time she had gone out for a smoke. She rounded the corner to another corridor, just as desolate as the previous one. Each room she passed was vacant, the wide open doors revealing dilapidated rooms with warped, mattressless bed frames and torn curtains. The windows were so dirty that the trees outside appeared like giant ghosts, the lightning turning the branches into dark silhouettes that looked like arms scraping the glass as if they were trying to claw their way in.

“Office nineteen,” she whispered, glancing at the doors and walls in search of the room.

She rounded the next corner and stopped. The hallway ended at a wide metal door a few feet away. It looked like it weighed more than a car. She was puzzled, having never seen such a large door anywhere else in the building. Its riveted surface reminded her of an armored door she’d seen in an air raid shelter during her training. A double-wide steel chain ran from the door’s large, oblong handle to a steel hook bolted to the adjacent wall. The ends of the chain were secured by an oversized padlock. That wasn’t all. Two bulky latches secured the bottom edge of the door to the floor.

A brief low-pitched noise stole the nurse's attention. She looked over her shoulder and spotted another closed door a few feet behind her. She glanced at a plate on the doorframe. "Here we are," she announced with a bit of relief, noticing the number nineteen. She turned, straightened her skirt and hat, cleared her throat and knocked.

Only the faint, steady sound of rain came from the other side.

As she waited, her curiosity again drew her to the armored door. She took a few steps and examined it more carefully. Parts of the chains were rusted. She touched the top one and felt a layer of dust coat her fingers. She then tugged at a metal viewing slot at the top center of the door. With her strong hand, she slid it open, revealing a small window built into the door. She stood on her tiptoes to have a glimpse of what lay on the other side, only to find the glass frosted with dirt. She only saw that the hallway continued, and that it was brighter on the other side. Why it was sealed off from the rest of the floor didn't make any sense.

Another sound came through the door of office number nineteen, taking her away from the armored door. She approached and knocked. "Comrade Vadenko, are you there?"

Again, there was no answer. Only a strange murmur drowned by the rain crept through the door. She leaned her head against it, trying to make sense of the bizarre noise. She closed her eyes, listened intently and quickly gathered what it was: someone crying—a man.

"Is everything all right?" she asked hesitantly.

“Dammit, who is it?” The male voice was as deep as it was unfriendly.

“Katia, from radiology,” the nurse answered apprehensively, now asking herself why she—and not someone else—had been so unlucky as to be given this chore.

The man didn’t respond.

She waited, rubbing her arms to warm herself. It was cold enough that she saw the white vapor of her breaths exit her lips.

“Can’t this wait?” the man groaned, his cavernous monotone voice sending shivers down her spine.

It sure can, she thought. I could slip this letter under your door and never have to see your face. But an odd sense of duty, coupled with her instinctive curiosity, tugged at her to persist. “I have a letter for you. I’ve been told it’s important.” She began to smell something burning. It was coming from the doctor’s office.

“Nothing is important anymore . . . Nothing!” the man said. “But come in if you must.”

Katia turned the knob and cracked open the door. The edge of a wooden desk came into view. She pushed the door further, glanced straight ahead and jumped back. “Doctor!”

The man was slouched behind his desk with a gun in his hands, the barrel pointed at the wall to his left. The window behind him was wide open, and the large raindrops battered the sill. His eyes were closed, his cheeks moist with tears.

Katia glanced at a metal garbage can with small flames and smoke rising from it. It appeared that papers and file folders were burning. She then turned her atten-

tion back to the armed doctor in front her. "What . . . what are you doing?" she asked, her eyes never leaving the weapon. The faint smell of liquor seeped into her lungs.

The doctor opened his eyes. They were red with dark gray bags under them. He speared her with an angry yet hollow gaze, but said nothing.

"You should put that down," she suggested, her heart now racing. "Please!"

"Why?" he barked, his face turning stone-cold. His gaze descended to the black revolver in his hands. "It's all over anyway. I can't take this wretched existence, condemned to be the guardian of what lies behind that steel door. For two years! Two years where nobody gives a damn about my career, my life, my dreams. Even my trusted allies have abandoned me. Even Comrade Karmachov, that swine, that wretched swine. I can't do this one more day, not one more hour!" His shoulders sank as he shook his head, his eyes staring more intently at his gun.

"I came only to—" Katia said before interrupting herself with a more important thought. "Maybe I should call someone to come help you."

"No one can help me, unless—" Doctor Vadenko stopped speaking as his eyes fixated on the envelope in her hand. His sully gaze intensified. "It's from the Ministry, isn't it?" he asked, though his pitiful look told her he already knew. He turned his head away.

"What is it, Doctor?" she asked.

"So, you came to deliver the bad news," he said with a long breath behind his words.

“I don’t understand?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Haven’t you heard, you stupid woman?” he asked loudly as if she ought to know.

Katia’s feet were frozen to the floor. *Is it loaded?* she asked herself, hoping it wasn’t, wishing it was all one huge joke. But it wasn’t. Her heart continued to race. *Of course it is loaded; of course he can use it.*

The doctor slammed his gun onto the top of the desk. “Didn’t you hear me? Don’t you know what’s going on?”

Her hands began shaking. Her legs too. “What are you saying?” she asked, almost shouting.

“It’s the . . .” he began, but paused, appearing lost in his own imploding thoughts. “It was on the radio, minutes ago. Our country is falling apart. *Everything* is falling apart!”

“I don’t—”

“You idiot. Moscow! There’s a state of emergency, MVD troops are surrounding the Parliament, Yeltsin is calling it a coup and our Ministry has shut down.” He heaved a yard of air before clumsily scraping the gun in an ark along the surface of the desk. “Hold that envelope up in the air.”

She did as she was told, her hands trembling.

“Higher!”

“Can I just give it to you?”

“No, I know what it says,” he uttered with disgust. “Those bastards. But now it is not only me who is doomed. We are *all* finished.”

He suddenly reminded her of her husband: drunk, despairing of life and occasionally bellicose—but not

nearly as dangerous as a deranged, plastered scientist holding a firearm. She wanted to listen, to understand the troubling news. Hell, she wanted to tear open the envelope to know what on earth this insane man meant. But she couldn't as long as his weapon was so close, so imminently able to terminate her existence with a simple gesture. "Please put that down and let me call for help."

Her suggestion angered him. "Shut up. What do you know? You're just a peasant girl in a uniform. You probably think working in this place is just fine. Where mediocrity reigns and where your stupidity blinds you from ambition. You can rot here if you wish. I will *not*."

If Katia had her way, she would have knocked his teeth out. "You should be glad to be here. Safe, away from Moscow. Away from the chaos."

"Then you will die here." He cocked his head back and wiped his tears with his sleeve. He then tightened his hold on the gun's grip, slid his index finger around the trigger and aimed the weapon up.

Katia took a step back without even thinking.

He swung the barrel over the desk, a pinging sound resonating as it tapped an empty vodka bottle that lay over his papers. The bottle rolled off the edge of the desk and shattered on the floor. Bits of glass sprayed over her feet, and pungent vapors of alcohol quickly came her way. She stared at the doctor's vacant expression and gauged his every movement by the millimeter.

Perhaps with deliberately exaggerated flair, he pointed the revolver at his temple. His eyes narrowed and then shut as he strained his face. "Save yourself, woman, while you still can—"

Katia had to do something, anything to stop this lunacy. She lunged at him, her body clumsily flying over the desk, her arms stretched forward. “*Nyet!*”

A loud bang ricocheted through the thunder and rain.