

Prologue

The only thing worth killing for is family.

Her father's words to her, the day they'd come for him.

She'd been fourteen when two men in combat fatigues and balaclavas burst into the kitchen where she and her father were enjoying breakfast. The armed commandos hadn't seen his pistol lying beneath a folded newspaper. While her father struggled with the men, his eyes flicked between her and the weapon. She could have darted for it, threatened them, helped him. But she hesitated. The moment slipped past. They threw a black hood over his head, cuffed him, and dragged him away... to be interrogated, tortured, executed and buried in the woods. A single thought haunted her ever since.

Had he known they would come?

Four years later, Nadia picked up his Beretta, its dark metal cool in her hands. She checked and re-loaded the magazine. She walked to the window, took one last look at the wild garden where her father had taught her to shoot, and the gravel path leading through the pine forest to the banks of the Volga. There, she'd learned first to swim, then to dive. Turning away, she stashed the pistol in her backpack and crept downstairs, hoping to escape unseen.

But her mother was waiting for her on the doorstep, arms folded. 'You'll end up a killer just like him, Nadia. Or a whore, like your sister.'

Nadia pushed by without replying. She passed through the creaking gate that had so often announced her father's return, and breathed easier after the turn of the road. She waited an hour for the bus, partly hoping – but mainly dreading – that her mother would come running around the corner begging her to return.

Fifty miles from Moscow, where her sister Katya lived, everyone had to get off the bus at a security checkpoint to show *papiren*. Nadia left her backpack under the seat. When she reached the front of the line, a young soldier flicked noisily through her passport, then glanced up, surprise lighting his smile.

'Happy birthday,' he said. 'Eighteen. A special day.'

Nadia moved into a grotty studio flat in Old Arbat, where each night she fell asleep exhausted from working in the local bakery from four a.m. until three p.m., then at a supermarket until nine at night. She kept her hair cropped, dressed for comfort, and was often mistaken at first sight for a young man, which was fine with her. She liked boys well enough,

but hated the unsubtle flirting, the vodka-fuelled race to unconsciousness, the lies. She'd loved her father, but he'd been one of the worst with women, and she'd seen the damage it had done to her mother.

She didn't get enough time with Katya, but on Wednesdays they'd go to the Sevastopol Hotel, the rock-bottom market. They'd start on the sixteenth floor and work their way down, Katya usually buying her little sister Chinese or Afghan trinkets to brighten her dingy flat, seeing who could negotiate the hardest, laughing about it afterwards over ice cream. And every Sunday afternoon they'd head to Gorky Park, taking turns to push each other on the swings just like when they were younger, and ice skating as winter approached, always hand in hand. Sometimes they talked about their parents, but only back in the past, during those good, early years. But when they'd hug, Nadia remembered how they used to hold each other in bed during their parents' screaming matches downstairs.

Katya never invited Nadia to her place, never spoke about what she did with the rest of her time. Nadia didn't want to probe, didn't want to break the spell. Besides, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Then the ever-gorgeous Katya invited her dark-haired kid sister to a party at a luxurious country dacha owned by a wealthy businessman, Kadinsky. Nadia was never formally introduced, though Katya clearly knew him very well. Nadia was mesmerised by the women with perfect skin in glittering, low-cut dresses, the handsome and not-so-handsome men, their jewellery and fancy cars and easy talk of big deals. Viktor, a man twice her age, who turned out to be someone in government, seduced her. He wasn't bad-looking, took his time in bed, and left cash for her breakfast in the mornings.

She let things coast for six months, no demands or promises on either side. She presumed he was married. She never asked, and he never said. She gave up the early morning bakery job, and thought about getting a cat.

Then one day Viktor was on the news, handcuffed, being forced into a police van. She leapt off the sofa and began packing a bag, but within minutes a loud rapping sounded on the door. The Beretta was on the table, fully loaded. She hid it under a loose floorboard, then opened the door.

Receiving misappropriated funds. That's what they told her at the station, though she was never formally charged, never saw a lawyer. Once inside Lubyanka prison, Nadia was informed she'd be their guest for twelve years, ten if she behaved. On the anniversary of her father's death, she gazed through the prison bars, studied the sad faces staring back at her from the ugly block opposite. She turned away, took in the inside of her cell. The double bunk with rancid sheets under which she shivered each night, curled up in the foetal position. The iron toilet that stank of her own piss and shit – they wouldn't give her the bucket of water to flush it until lunchtime. The cold grey bars, faded whitewashed brick walls, not even graffiti to lighten her mood. And the lone hook in the ceiling that her former cellmate had used to end everything while Nadia had been out in the exercise yard. The fourth suicide since her arrival.

Ten years? She wouldn't make it.

Shouting erupted down the corridor. Wolf-whistles, tin mugs clanging against cell bars, lascivious remarks from several lesbian inmates, one of whom already had her eye on Nadia. And then a gruff man's voice, more like a growl. Silence. Nadia stared at the bars. It couldn't be anyone for her. No one had visited her since her incarceration. But she listened. A man's shoes, heavy, impatient, and high heels clacking behind, almost running to keep up. Nadia smelled her sister's perfume, and took a step forward as the footsteps approached. But Katya wasn't alone. Nadia took a step back.

Kadinsky.

Since being locked away, she'd heard on the grapevine that he was a gangster, not a businessman, and now she saw him close up for the first time, he fit the bill. He had a gleaming bald head, like he actually polished it every morning, and was fat without being flabby, as if his weight was there to throw around, to crush you if necessary. He wore an expensive, baggy beige suit, and gold jewellery dripped from his wrists and neck. Katya stood behind him in a skimpy red dress and high heels, tousled hair falling behind her shoulders, her large eyes hopeful and scared at the same time. There was no guard with them. Kadinsky held a ring of keys in his hand. He selected one that looked indistinguishable from the twenty others dangling from the ring, shoved it into the slot, turned it with a resounding clank, and stepped inside.

Nadia wanted to hug her sister, but Kadinsky stood between them. He turned his head to the side, not enough to see Katya, but just enough so she'd know he was talking to her.

'One word, and I walk. Turn around. Give the other inmates a treat.'

Katya gave one last look at her sister, then dutifully turned around and faced the bars. There was silence outside. Everyone was listening. Especially Nadia.

Kadinsky glanced at his gold Rolex, as if bored, somewhere else he'd rather be. Anywhere. He glanced at Nadia, then folded his chubby arms, stretching the fabric of his suit.

'I'll ask you a single question, girl. You have three chances to give the right answer. If you do, you come with us. If not, you stay, and see your sister in twelve years.' He glanced at the toilet bowl, grimaced, pulled out a silk handkerchief, blew his nose noisily, then stuffed it back into his pocket. 'And be quick.'

Nadia tensed, stood almost to attention, and waited for the question.

'What did you do wrong?'

Nadia's reply was too fast, a prison reflex, what everyone here said when they first met someone new in the canteen or the yard.

'Nothing,' she said.

'Wrong answer,' he said. 'Second try.'

Of course it was the wrong bloody answer. He was a gangster, so in his mind everyone had done something wrong. She stared at the keys in his hands. The door was open. Soon, one way or another, it would be locked shut. *Think!* Maybe just the facts...

'I met Viktor Romanovich at your dacha. We had an affair. It lasted six months. One day I saw him on TV, being taken away, arrested on corruption charges. While I was packing, they came for me, threw me in here.' *But what had she done wrong?* She'd just enjoyed the ride, a little life, a little luxury, someone who'd looked after her. She pictured Viktor. A man twice her age. Old enough to be... She shuddered. 'I should have found out what he was up to, asked where the money came from.'

Kadinsky made half-fists, turned them palm upwards, and studied the fingernails of one hand, then the other. He stared at her like she was a waste of skin. 'One last try. What did you do wrong?'

Nadia looked at her sister's outline; she was trembling. What had she done wrong? She didn't know. Been born, maybe? So, she'd stay here, die here. Could she do that to Katya? If her father hadn't got messed up in God-knew-what, if he'd still been around, things would have been different. What had *he* done wrong? She never knew. But then she realised what it

was she'd done wrong, both times. She'd not picked up the gun for her father, that fateful day. And when they'd come for her, his Beretta – the only keepsake she had from him – had been right there, on the table.

She looked Kadinsky in the eye. She didn't know if it was the answer he was looking for. Whichever side of those bars she ended up on, she had a feeling it would be her epitaph.

'I let them take me.'

Kadinsky grunted. Looked at his watch again. 'We're leaving,' he said.

Katya spun around and Nadia found herself wrapped in her sister's arms, felt her sister's hot tears on her cheeks. Nadia's head tilted upwards, and while she succumbed to the embrace, she stared at the lone hook in the ceiling. *Fuck you.*

Kadinsky got Nadia out with bribes and promised favours. Of course, she'd have to work it off.

Once back at Kadinsky's country dacha, she stood in the large lounge with its single bay window overlooking the dry fountain, a chipped statue of Pan in its centre. Inside, oil paintings of battles, including one above the fireplace featuring a victorious Napoleon, hung around the white, corniced walls. Kadinsky ordered Katya not to speak, then walked around Nadia. He looked her up and down, then shook his head. He dropped into a wide leather armchair. Katya was perched on an antique wooden dining seat opposite. Nadia stood between them, and Kadinsky's two henchmen – one grossly fat, the other slim as a snake and with pockmarked cheeks – leaned against the far wall.

'You have grey eyes,' he said, wagging a finger at her. 'Like a fucking tombstone. Who'd want to make love staring into such eyes?' He glanced at Katya. 'Are you sure she's your sister?'

Katya's gaze dropped to the carpet. She nodded, her own eyes a deep blue, like her mother's. Nadia had her father's eyes. *Killer's eyes*, he'd once joked, when she'd been too young to realise it was a confession.

Kadinsky swirled the ice in his whiskey tumbler with a pudgy index finger. 'What else can you do, girl?'

Nadia never knew where her answer came from, possibly revulsion against a life of prostitution, but she thought of her father, and the words slid out of her mouth. 'I can shoot. I never miss.'

Kadinsky's thugs laughed. He didn't. 'I detest exaggeration,' he said. 'So American.' His mouth moved as if he was going to spit.

'Let's see if you can really shoot. Give her your pistol,' he said to one of the henchmen, the one with a pockmarked face – *Pox*, she named him – who immediately lost his sense of humour.

She took the weapon from his outstretched hand, weighed it in her palm. An old-style Smith & Wesson. God knows why the guy had it. Most *blatnye* preferred semi-autos, Makarovs or the older but higher-velocity Tokarevs. She checked that it was loaded, all six bullets nestling in their chambers. She glanced at Kadinsky, thought about killing him. But

the other henchman, the fat one with slicked black hair – hence, *Slick* – had his Glock trained on her, his lopsided leer daring her.

Kadinsky waved a hand towards Katya, five metres away. He tilted his head left and right, then settled back against the soft leather, took a gulp of whiskey, and smacked his lips. ‘The red rose in the bowl of flowers behind her left ear. Shoot it. From where you stand.’

Slick’s eyes flicked toward Katya, gauging the angles. His leer faded.

Nadia stared at her sister and the rose. Most of it was behind her head. Only one leaf of the scarlet blossom was exposed. She swallowed, then lifted the revolver, and took up a shooting stance like her father had taught her. Right arm firm, elbow not fully locked, left hand under the fist, prepared for the recoil. She had to do it before anger built and disrupted her concentration. She cocked the hammer, lined up the shot, then spoke to Katya’s serene, trusting face: ‘Love you,’ she said. Then she breathed out slowly, as if through a straw, and squeezed the trigger.

Masonry exploded behind Katya. The crack was so loud that three other men burst into the room, weapons drawn. Kadinsky waved them back as Pox peeled the revolver from Nadia’s stiff fingers. Petals fluttered to the floor amidst a plume of white powder from the impact crater in the wall. Katya sat immobile, pale, the hair on the left side of her head ruffled as if by a gust of wind. A trickle of blood oozed from her left temple, and ran down her cheek.

Katya, lips trembling, beamed at Nadia. ‘Still alive,’ she said, her voice hoarse. She touched the graze with an unsteady forefinger.

Nadia began to shake. She folded her arms, refusing to give Kadinsky the satisfaction.

Later that night, while she slept in Katya’s bed, holding close the sister she’d almost killed, Slick and Pox burst into the room. Katya woke, leapt out of bed and told them to fuck off, for which she received the butt of a revolver across her mouth.

Nadia half-planned to try to grab one of the guys’ guns at a crucial moment, but they knew what they were doing. One held her down, while the other did whatever he wanted. She retreated into a corner of her mind, a memory, the first time her father had taught her to hold a gun, his arms around her, helping her aim, shooting at empty beer bottles. He’d been so proud of her when she’d hit one. But she couldn’t hang onto the memory. It hurt, what they were doing, it fucking hurt, and she knew this was a wound that would never heal. She tried to scream STOP! But Slick clamped his hand over her mouth. Katya leapt onto his back, aiming to pull him off, but Pox punched her in the stomach, then in the mouth. Katya went down, didn’t reappear. Nadia continued to struggle, thought of her father, how he’d be raging in hell if he could see this, knew what he’d do to these two bastards if he were there. She clung to his rage like a lifeline...

Eventually they left, and Katya, her chin smeared with blood, an ugly bruise rising on her left cheek, came back to the bed and held Nadia tight. Nadia’s body was strangely still, as if it belonged to someone else. She wished it did. While her eyes stayed dry, her elder sister cried and whispered apologies, repeating how it would be all right, the worst was over, and the important thing was that they were together. For the first time ever, that night, Nadia held her sister until she fell asleep, rather than the other way around.

At dawn Nadia woke to find her sister gone, presumably to Kadinsky's bed. She considered their predicament. Katya was locked into Kadinsky's world, and now she owed him too, and he wasn't about to simply let her off. She was trapped. Her mother's prediction came back to her: a killer or a whore. Maybe both.

She dressed, crept downstairs and stole outside, timing it to get past the guard by the main door when he went to take a piss. Snow crunched under her boots. She got a couple of miles from the dacha before she collapsed from the biting cold, and lay down in the crisp silence. 'It's okay,' she heard her mother say inside her head, with a kindness she'd not heard from her in years. 'Better this way.' She closed her eyes and went to sleep, hoping never to awaken, unless to join her father.

But she did wake, and found herself back in the dacha on a sofa, buried in blankets and fur coats. She shook violently. People were shouting in the room next door. Katya, Slick, and Pox, then that low growl that cut off everyone.

Katya came in. She wiped away tear streaks on her bruised face, and closed the door behind her. She braved a smile and walked toward Nadia. 'They won't touch you again,' she said, her voice shaky. 'Nobody will.' She sat down next to her.

Kadinsky entered, a gold-rimmed coffee cup in his hand, a sad-looking golden retriever trailing him. 'Here's the deal, girl.' He spoke to the bay window rather than her, and took a swig before continuing. 'I could use a female operative who doesn't wet herself under pressure. Maybe that could be you. You'll work for me for five years. Your training will take three, including eighteen months in Britain. I want your English impeccable – not like a newsreader, like a local.' He stared at her, his gaze hard. He stooped to pat the dog ineffectually, as if he didn't really know how, then stood tall, downing the last of the coffee. He spoke to the window again. 'Katya stays here. Do ten ops for me, then I'll let you both go.' He nodded to himself as if concluding the contract. 'Ten ops, five years. Then, *svoboda*... freedom.'

He left, not waiting for an answer. The dog followed, its head bowed.

Kadinsky's words echoed in her mind. *Five years*. Half the life she would have lost in prison. If she'd have lasted. Thinking of her cell helped. Katya had gotten Nadia out of her own personal hell. But would Kadinsky really let them both go afterward?

Katya hugged her, and she succumbed to the embrace, because the only person she cared for in this brutal world was Katya. 'It's going to be all right,' Katya said. 'You can trust him. Pyotr Aleksandrovich is a hard man, but he keeps his bargains.'

She knew what Katya was trying to do, using Kadinsky's first name and patronymic, making him seem like family. But something inside her hardened, as if the tears that should have come earlier turned to glass. She promised herself she would go and retrieve her father's Beretta the very next day, strip it, clean it, begin practising again.

Ten ops. Five years. Then, one way or the other, she and her sister were through with Kadinsky.

'It will be all right, Katya,' she said. 'Whatever it takes, I promise one day I'll *make* it right.'