



From **KYIVAN HOLIDAY**

by *Natalia Tysovska*

A young American Fulbright scholar ventures to Kyiv, Ukraine, only to find herself in the middle of two different mysteries both perilous and addictive.

A young American scholar, Jenny Barton, whose main scope of interest is the role of women in WWII, comes to Kyiv to work in the local archives but even before she can reach her destination she is taken hostage by criminals as a burglary witness. Her quick wit helps her run away only to wind up all alone in the suburban area, without money or ID, with the criminals chasing her.

By chance she meets two Ukrainian youths who give her shelter, and all of a sudden she is plunged into the current Ukrainian life with its every-day issues—aiding the Army, protesting against abuse of power, helping IDPs, countering foe intelligence which would be impossible without mutual aid, trust, and collective responsibility of common people. The past intertwines with the present, the danger becomes real, and Jenny realizes that her study of WWII will better than anything help her find common ground with modern Ukrainians.

By turns a tautly paced story of crime and violence and a captivating portrait of friendship and love, set against the unsettled backdrop of the city tormented by the war in the east of the country, *Kyivan Holiday* is an unforgettable journey to the Ukrainian capital.

Natalia Tysovska is an award-winning novelist and the Ukrainian translator of the *Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. She holds an MA degree in English from Lakehead University (Canada) and works as an editor at a publishing house.

Kyivan Holiday (abridged)

by Natalia Tysovska

Chapter 1

[...In the subway] my eyes fell upon a blue-uniformed boy who looked just like the US policemen. Who else can he be, I thought, and ran towards him. [...] Taking my sorry fate to heart, the policeman found the Fulbright address on his tablet and then, grabbing me by the elbow, escorted me out of the subway and to a skyscraper; the office I wanted was on the ninth floor. [...]

‘You’ll need a lift,’ the guard said.

‘A lift? Oh, you mean an elevator.’

‘Oh yes, the elevator, of course. [...] This way, to the right.’

There was a little line to the elevator—a young woman in a green jacket who looked about twenty five, and two guys. I was the last in line, and when the doors parted I managed to squeeze in. It was an ordinary elevator, except for the digital security lock on the board. As far as I could see, the elevator would not stop on certain levels without the correct code. Stepping in I pressed nine; the orange eye of the tenth button was already aglow, and the young woman tapped in the security code. I did not notice which level it was.

[...] It’s hard to recollect the exact sequence of what happened next. The elevator stopped, the woman made a step towards the hall but one of the guys blocked the exit.

[...] That was when I looked at him properly for the first time; he was red-haired under the cap, with grey-green watery eyes. I always notice when someone has red hair for I'm a redhead myself.

[...] The woman in the green jacket started to protest but was quickly pushed against the wall; I saw guns in the hands of the guys, heard the sound of many feet pounding from the direction of the stairwell and then the deafening crack—someone was trying to break the door. I could only imagine what was happening outside the elevator but it looked like the guys had partners in crime who turned the office upside down within minutes—again and again I heard crashing, crushing, smashing and screaming and, as I could guess from the tone of the voices, dirty language. Redhead was standing in the doorway of the elevator while his accomplice was pointing his gun at the secretary frozen behind her desk, so that she would not call for help.

[...] We exchanged a look with my sister in confinement and she followed my gaze to the first level button. The woman nodded slightly. I kicked the wedge from under the door and pushed the red-haired captor as hard as I could; the woman was already pressing the button. The doors shut, the elevator slid down, and we finally exhaled. With exasperating slowness, the elevator passed several floors, the doors parted—and we fell out directly into the arms of an older man, big and moon-faced and grey-haired, who was standing there surrounded by muscled lads.

Looked like it was the same gang.

There were no police sirens, no negotiations with the raiders, no street races. Everything happened so quickly that nobody had a chance to call the police; the two guards in the lobby were lying on the floor looking unconscious rather than dead as there was no blood. The sign CLOSED was placed on the glass doors [...], the elevator stood blocked while office workers from other levels continued working, oblivious to what was happening in the building.

[...] The captors searched both me and Lydia (I guess I can start calling her Lydia from now on, for in a little while I would learn her name) and took away all our belongings; in five minutes, when the raiders were ready to retire, they pushed us into a [...] van that stopped for a moment in front of the glass doors. And so Lydia and I turned from witnesses into hostages...

[...] We turned left and right several times more, finally reaching the destination point, and when the van stopped at last and the door opened we found ourselves in a small garage. Greyhead and Redhead who were there too marched us outside and to the stairs leading to the door above the garage. It was the entrance to a three-storied brick house. I went upstairs scanning it.

All the windows had iron bars. I'd never seen anything like that in my entire life.

[...] They treated us OK, nothing to complain about. We were given water and showed to the bathroom. Though small, the room on the upper floor where Lydia and I were locked had a window. [...]

Once the first shock had faded Lydia asked, 'What's your name?'

'Jenny.'

'American?'

'Yeah.'

'Craving for an extreme trip?'

'Actually, no,' I answered matching her tone, 'of course I've been warned that I should be ready to anything in a third-world country, but I didn't expect that this "anything" would start right away.'

'Very funny, but I'm not sure we'll make it to the morning.'

Well, we made it to the morning. [...]

In the morning, the door opened and Redhead armed with a gun brought us sausage sandwiches and a bottle of some lurid orange drink which tasted exactly what it looked. We settled on the

windowsill to have breakfast, meanwhile watching the white van leaving the garage. I saw Greyhead behind the wheel.

‘Vault... Vault...’ Lydia said as if thinking out loud. ‘No, it can’t be. They never do anything personally...’

‘What did you say?’

‘Never mind.’

[...] I sprawled on the couch staring at the ceiling.

White paneling, and a bare bulb in the middle.

The paneling. The last floor. We were almost under the roof.

‘Tell me something,’ I said to Lydia, ‘what is this paneling screwed to?’

‘Wooden boards, I’d guess.’

‘And wooden boards are not a concrete ceiling, are they? [...] Did you see a small gable window up there when they were marching us in? The only one without bars?’

[...] I started kicking the door, and minutes later Greyhead appeared looking cross. [...] He growled, ‘What?’

‘I need a bathroom.’

Strange as it may seem, but he did not object.

When I came back Lydia was curled up on the couch. [...]

‘Well,’ I decided to change the subject, ‘shall we start removing the paneling?’

‘Using what?’

‘The wrong question. The right question is how to do it quickly and quietly,’ I said taking a key ring out of my pocket. My dear American key ring—a car remote and a key to the car I had left in the garage back home, a key to my place and a small Swiss knife which, among other tools, had a tiny crosshead screwdriver.

‘How come?’

‘I told him I needed pads. And I had some in my backpack.’

‘I would never suspect such ingenuity in a life-spoiled American,’ Lydia smirked.

It would take forever to describe in detail the way Lydia and I worked on the paneling with a two-inch screwdriver, jumping at every sound...

[...] Four planks were already lying behind the couch when Lydia and I settled on the spring mattress, bouncing for distraction and scanning [the boards of the ceiling]... The boards were hammered to the beams and could hardly be removed without a crowbar. I squeezed my nails into the slit and tried to pry the rough wood [...] I almost collapsed having lost balance and had to grab the paneling to steady myself—and my hand fell into the void.

My hand came out of the gap full of splinters but it did not matter. Well, nobody promised me a smooth escape from the captivity.

[...] In about an hour, a four-inch gap in the ceiling boards greeted our eyes... [...] I’d guess there had used to be a manhole during construction which then had been simply covered with the paneling. The path to escape materialized.

[...] Finally, the last screw nail fell out and a black rectangle saluted us looking like a secret passage to an alternate reality rather than a roof trap. It gave me the creeps.

[...] Here comes the gable window! [...] We fastened the makeshift rope to the TV antenna by the window. I would not say it was a secure contrivance by the look of it but, as you could guess, it stood and we did not fall to death—otherwise I would not be telling you this story now. [...]

If not for the distant lantern on the hill we'd break our legs on the dirt road. It was stretching up and up, and in a little while we found ourselves in the fields. The night was black as pitch... [...] No sooner had we made several steps than we heard the rustling of the tires and the low rumbling of the engine. Lydia and I turned around simultaneously.

'A white van!' she cried. 'Run!'

And she darted blindly across the field. I panicked and rushed in her wake but tripped on a tuft and crashed down. I rolled over watching with clouded eyes the headlights get closer, bigger, brighter and then drive by in a heartbeat. And it did not look like a white van at all—the car looked much smaller to me.

'Lydia,' I called. 'Lydia!'

[...] Silence.

The vast fields were stretching infinitely in all directions and I was standing all alone in the middle of nowhere.

Chapter 2

A classic opening to an adventure story. The modern-age Jane Eyre finds herself in uncharted territory having left her last belongings and money in the coach. Please add to it the fact that this Jane Eyre is in a foreign country, her knowledge of the local language leaves much to be desired while her only familiar soul—Lydia—ran for the hills and would not answer her calls.

[...] I was slowly trudging forward [...] when I saw a little light in the distance. Once again, it reminded me the scene when Jane Eyre, hungry and exhausted and ready to die, sees a heaven-sent candle light in a distant window. Well, my light looked like a fire rather than a candle...

I cautiously approached. [...But] no sooner had I turned off the road than out of nowhere a shadow materialized in front of me.

'Woof!' the shadow said. I jumped.

'Tunguska! Tunguska!' a boy's voice called. 'Who's that?'

[...] A boy wrapped in a way too big army camo jacket was sitting on a log by the cooking fire. [...] At the fire pit, I finally had a chance to look at the dog properly—he was a curious blend of the Boxer and the German Shepherd, his eyes almond-shaped and intelligent. Even mischievous, I would say.

'Hi,' I said to Tunguska's master. 'May I warm up a little?'

The kid jerked his chin towards the log he was sitting on—there was enough room for me there. I sat down and reached out my hands to the fire.

'You sound strange.'

'You mean my accent?'

'Yeah.'

'I'm from overseas. The United States of America, sounds familiar?'

'Oh, Yankees-NATO-Obama-jerk,' the kid said with neither stops nor emphasis. [...]

'My name's Jenny,' I decided to be polite. 'This is Tunguska, as far as I understand, and you are...'

'Alex.' [...]

‘Isn’t it scary to spend the night all alone here?’ I asked finally in my lame Ukrainian. ‘The fire is very distinct from afar.’

‘There are no people here. It’s a summer village, everybody’s back to Kyiv for the winter. And Tunguska’s guarding me.’

‘Oh, if Tunguska’s guarding then it must be safe, definitely.’

The kid was cute but I still did not understand what he was doing all by himself in the fields in the dead of the night. [...]

Having finally warmed up I felt like dozing off. [...] I woke up with a start and realized it was morning already. [...]

The kid started packing his things.

I asked, ‘Tunguska and you going somewhere?’

‘Kyiv,’ he grumbled.

‘Great! Could you take me with you, please?’

[...] There were only two people at the bus stop, a young man and his girlfriend. Tunguska made a move to sniff at them but Alex tugged at his leash determined to pass the bus stop without slowing down. [...]

I asked, ‘Is it far to Kyiv?’

The girl snorted. ‘Well, if you plan to continue afoot you might get there by nightfall.’ [...]

I heard scary clatter from the road curve, and moments later a truck appeared, its body made of dark-green canvass. The young man waved his hand...

‘Can you give us a ride to Kyiv?’ [...]

‘Get in the back.’ [...]

‘Well, you can now start telling us the story of why you’ve fallen to such a miserable life,’ the girl said talking over the roar of the old engine.

The young man interrupted her. ‘Wait a sec. First we need to introduce ourselves. This is Alla. And I’m Max.’ He extended his hand.

I shook hands with him. ‘Jenny.’ His palm was strong, dry, and cool. I must confess I enjoyed shaking hands with him. And the man himself was good enough—shapely, tall, oval-faced, grey-eyed... OK, OK, let’s call a spade a spade: Prince Charming. [...]

Alla asked once again, ‘So, why are you traveling on foot?’

‘We didn’t plan to. We’re not together in fact,’ I started to ramble. ‘It’s just that I’d been robbed, then... well, it’s a long story but I didn’t mean to make a trek to the country, and I need to stop by the Embassy because now that my passport is gone how shall I return home?’

‘Don’t you worry, getting you to the Embassy is not a problem. What about you, Kid?’

Alex grumbled, ‘I’m from Avdiivka [Donetsk Region].’

‘What have you just said?’ Alla asked in a strange voice. ‘How did you get here?’

‘Depends. Sometimes by suburban rail, sometimes on foot. [...]

‘I see. Well, you’re going with us for now, and later we’ll see.’

[...] In a little while the truck began to slow down... [...] Max was the first to jump down onto the pavement. Tunguska followed him; meanwhile Max was taking down Alex. [...]

Alex scowled. ‘So, now what?’

‘Now we are going to the end of the street,’ Alla said, ‘where Jenny and Max will take the subway—’

‘The subway?’ I interjected.

‘Well, didn’t you want to get to the Embassy? That’s exactly where Max is taking you.’

They want to get rid of me, I thought bitterly but only thanked them out loud.

[...] Across the road [...] I saw a well-guarded entrance to the Consulate and, deeper in the yard, a massive pale building of the Embassy itself. The most important part was to get inside. But would the guards let me in without an ID? Maybe it would be wiser to turn to the police first. I had no idea what was the procedure in such cases and thus panicked a little.

It might have been this momentary hesitation that predetermined all the subsequent events. Frozen on the curb, I scanned the people across the street—and suddenly something familiar caught my eye. A cap, a high, freckled cheekbone, reddish curls.

‘Bye,’ Max started saying but I didn’t give him a chance to finish; grabbing him by the elbow I whirled around and marched off determinedly in the direction we had come from. Redhead was standing half-turned looking mostly at the entrance to the Consulate and, hopefully, didn’t notice us.

It looked like the Embassy business was being delayed indefinitely.

Chapter 3

While I was going meekly to wherever Max was taking me I connected the dots: my passport remained in the backpack my captors had taken from me the first day. So, when Lydia and I managed to escape it was logical to assume that in my sorry state I would turn to the Embassy first of all—where else could I go in a foreign country without an ID?

I wondered if they were searching for Lydia, too. Or maybe they’d already grabbed her? I didn’t want even to think about.

Deep in thought, I paid little attention to the road and lifted up my head only when the trolleybus spilled us at the city outskirts built over with tower-blocks. [...] We were facing an old apartment building which seemed out of whack with a newly build mall to the right, its illumination fully on even in the daylight. [...]

A blue plate hammered to the door said, DONATIONS DROP-OFF; the window panes were riddled with a splash of various stickers which looked quite militaristic to me. I saw a flag in one of the windows. Max knocked and opened the door without waiting for an answer.

We stepped into a little mudroom crammed with boxes; further on I saw a long hallway jam-packed with large cases of bottled water. A tall and big guy who looked just over thirty stepped from the dark depths of the hallway; blond and round-faced, he shook hands with Max and turned to me.

He introduced himself. ‘Yurko.’

‘Jenny,’ I replied mechanically. I had a feeling as if I were being dragged into a whirlpool, and the more I kicked the deeper I sank. It was as though I had been shaken out of my rut and instead placed in somebody else’s one. [...]

‘Have a sit,’ Yurko said. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

I realized that I would like a cup of tea more than anything right now; I hadn’t had tea since the plane and nothing to eat since morning except for the heel of bread Alex shared with me. Where was he, by the way?

As if on cue, there was a bark, and moments later Tunguska galloped into the room and started baying but sniffed at the air and, recognizing me, thought better of it. Following him, Alex

sauntered in; he was without his enormous jacket but got himself a matching pair of army camo pants.

‘A cup of tea, please,’ I nodded to Yurko. ‘I’d be most grateful.’

The host disappeared in the depths of the dark hallway, and in five minutes Alla came instead of him carrying a tea pot and mugs. [...]

‘By the way,’ Alla said, ‘just before you came I was checking the online news... and stumbled across a short article about the kidnapping of a daughter of Prosecutor C. She was abducted together with a red-haired young woman not yet identified.’

‘You think the red-haired young woman is me?’ I mused. Alla shrugged pointedly. [...]

‘Jenny, isn’t it time for you to go to the police?’ Alla said.

‘I don’t know,’ I grumbled. I was so drowsy that didn’t want to move. ‘I’ll go there. Later. After the tea. Perhaps.’

[...] With my belly full I started dozing off at the table, and Yurko walked me to a room the size of a closet, crammed with boxes up to the ceiling, and got me off to sleep... Stretching on the hard floor, I plunged into sleep like into a black hole.

Low voices woke me up. They sounded like Yurko and Max talking. [...]

‘What’s with Student?’

‘Nothing new. The Law Troop is taking care of his case. They already have the testimony of a guy from the 128th Regiment.’

‘One guy? We need at least two.’

‘They are looking for another one right now.’

‘What if we turn to—’

‘Do you know how many officials we’ve already turned to? They all shy away from the problem.’

‘What if we speak to Movchun? I heard he’d already helped one volunteer fighter. It was not a casualty, just a war injury, but still—’ [...]

There were a jar of milk that looked almost a gallon to me, a couple of mugs, and some rolls on the table.

‘Will you have breakfast?’ Max asked and disappeared in the hallway without waiting for my answer; he came back in a little while carrying a clean mug. He poured some milk for me from the jar.

‘Your milk comes in such packaging?’ I mused; the jar didn’t look sterile to me.

‘What’s wrong with the packaging?’

‘It’s not a carton,’ Max figured out. ‘Have you forgotten where she comes from?’ He turned to me. ‘Have you ever been to a farm? Drunk milk fresh from the cow?’

My eyes popped out. ‘Raw milk straight from the cow? Are you crazy? For one thing, it’s not safe, and for another, where could you get raw milk from in the city?’

Max and Yurko bellowed with laughter. [...]

‘Go and boil some milk for her,’ Yurko said to Max through laughing. ‘Don’t you scare the child.’

[...] Bugger the milk, I could definitely eat the roll—it was packed properly! In five minutes, Max brought hot milk, so rich and sweet that I felt additional pounds growing on my butt. Well, nothing to worry about—Lydia and I had been fasting for quite some time...

My only problem now was that I sponged on my newly acquired friends, for I had absolutely no money... Money! I had to find a way to take off some money from my account. My cards had been stolen in the subway on my very first day in Kyiv... [...] Thus, I needed a computer.

I turned to Yurko. ‘Do you have Skype?’

‘There’s a laptop in the cabinet,’ he replied absent-mindedly.

I got up and opened the doors of the cabinet above the table; I saw a whole pile of junk—there were rusty spare parts, and broken torches, and ropes, and wire there.

My host looked puzzled. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Looking for a laptop in the cabinet.’

‘This is a shelf and the cabinet is down the hall.’ Smiling, Yurko walked me to another cubbyhole I hadn’t noticed before—as far as I could see it was his bedroom slash study.

‘Oh, you mean the study,’ I said. Those language discrepancies would drive me mad! [...]

I was happy to have solved at least one problem from the list of my to-do things. In a couple of hours, Max’s phone buzzed—it was a notification that the money got in. At least I’d been told the truth at the Fulbright Office that Ukraine was a livable country, even if they drank raw milk straight from the cow. Yuck! [...]

[After the lunch] the conversation switched to my adventures, and this time I had to tell about the kidnapping in detail because the guys were attacking me from both sides.

As soon as I finished Max said broodingly, ‘You know you need to describe the kidnapping as well as the kidnappers and post it online. [...] Don’t make the chief mistake of the murder mystery characters—if you know a terrible secret share it with the world so that the bad guys would no longer have a reason to get rid of you.’ [...]

Thus, [...] when Yurko went home to his wife, I spent two hours at the laptop recalling the smallest details of the abduction and the looks of my and Lydia’s captors. [...] Max translated my opus into Ukrainian, and then I posted it on my Twitter tagging, on Max’s advice, the local Interior Ministry. It was pitch-dark outside. It grows dusky quite early in Kyiv in November. Max [...] sloped off somewhere, and I managed to get the protesting Alex off to sleep in the middle of yet another computer game.

With an agreeable feeling of duty done, I climbed into my sleeping bag which felt like home now, but my wakening was awful; in the dead of the night, I woke up with a start in the inky darkness shaken by an explosion and a rattle of broken glass.

Chapter 4

I thought the chattering of my teeth was clearly heard in all surrounding tower-blocks. I was sitting in courtyard tightly hugging Alex and pressing his face to my belly, for he had stopped screaming wildly less than ten minutes ago and at the moment my chief fear was that he would start screaming again.

All this time, Tunguska hadn’t barked once. At first, when I’d heard the explosion, I couldn’t understand what’d happened. Fireworks? A firecracker? Then I’d heard a wild scream and rushed, still half-asleep and wearing just a T-shirt, to the hallway. I’d got as far as the kitchen—the wailing had been coming from there and I’d lunged inside ready to pull Alex from under the rubble. But the kitchen had looked untouched though the kid had been yelling and sobbing and hiding under the table while completely silent Tunguska had been pressing close against him and crouching.

A moment later Max had stepped in, and Alex had recoiled for no obvious reason.

‘Junta-Fascists-raiders,’ he’d started shrieking without any pauses. ‘Don’t-don’t-don’t!’

‘Are you OK?’ Max had asked making a move towards the kid but Tunguska had snarled frightfully.

I’d asked, ‘What happened?’

‘A grenade. They threw it into the balcony window. It smashed in the window panes and damaged the door a little. But every single resident of the block is in the courtyard now, and the neighbors called the police.’

For a few moments Max had been staring at Alex pensively.

‘It might be better for you two to wait outside,’ he said finally, ‘because they might take the kid to the juvenile delinquents’ room. And you—’

I’d bristled. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ Even if the grenade had been the result of my yesterday’s confessions on Twitter, it was Max who’d advised me to do so.

‘Nothing’s wrong, it’s just that you are a foreigner without any ID, they can place you in detention.’ [...]

‘So what’s next?’ [...]

‘We’re going to Alla’s uni dorm on Lomonosov Street.’

‘Who’s Lomonosov?’

‘A fake scientist.’

I nodded slowly as if I got it. [...]

Alla was waiting for us on the corner of the street. [...]

Alla pulled a wallet out of her pocket, counted up the money for no apparent reason, then took Tunguska’s leash from Alex [...] and went to the entrance of a grey small-windowed building with tiny sidewall balconies starting one level above the ground. In a heartbeat she disappeared inside, and Alex pattered perplexedly, ‘Banderas-Khokhols-Nazies-give-me-back-my-dog...’

In five minutes we heard a low whistle from above. I lifted up my head. Alla was waving her hand from the lowest balcony. She disappeared for a moment, and then a square hole opened in the floor and a ladder stuck out. That was when I noticed for the first time the rusty fire-escape running diagonally from balcony to balcony.

‘Hurry up,’ Alla urged. First we pushed Alex up, and then Max and I followed him. Alla hastily pulled in the ladder and battened down the hatches to cover up the evidence of the crime.

I asked, ‘Where is Tunguska?’

‘In my room already,’ Alla replied. ‘I had to bribe the custodian to bring him in.’ [...]

There was a hundred comments under my tweet when I opened my Twitter. [...One of the comments] was made from the official page of a District Attorney Office, the authenticity of the comment was undoubtful. Max and I stared at the screen.

Good afternoon. Please visit the District Attorney Office any time soon, from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m. Office 312. Tell the guards I’ve invited you, I’ll have them warned beforehand and they’ll take you to my office immediately. Absolute discretion guaranteed. The signature said, Chopyk M. V. [...]

‘I have to go.’ [...]

‘It might be easier to call first,’ [Max said].

‘It might,’ Alla said, ‘but how to prove over the phone that it’s her calling?’

‘Can you guarantee that she won’t be detained at the District Attorney Office?’

‘It may be for the better if I’m detained,’ I said philosophically. ‘I will be totally safe there.’

Chapter 5

[...] The District Attorney Office did not impress me. A tiny lobby with two worn armchairs, a guard in a glass booth, a revolving gate. [...] The sign on the wooden door leading to the necessary office read, CHOPYK M. V., PROSECUTOR. [...] Gesturing to a chair, the prosecutor reached out and introduced himself. [...]

I shook his hand. ‘Jenny. Jenny Barton.’

‘Nice to meet you.’

‘So, Lydia’s your daughter?’ I blurted.

My vis-à-vis winced but nodded.

‘I’ve read your online confessions,’ he said. ‘But I would like to know the details. Do you remember the van? [...] Where did they take you?’

[...] Closing my eyes I tried remembering the way Alex had taken me to the bus stop. I could recollect very well the distance we’d covered together with Lydia, and I had no difficulties describing the house. I have a good memory for details... [...]

The prosecutor put down my every word and even drew a map and finally lifted his eyes from his notes. [...]

‘Do you have a place to stay?’ [...]

‘Well... there is a dorm,’ I started vaguely. ‘I’m much more concerned that I have no ID.’ [...]

‘Fill in an application. If we find your things I promise to give you your passport back immediately.’ [...]

I filled in the application form, and then the prosecutor shook my hand again and walked me outside telling me to take good care. [...] Oddly enough, he’d never questioned me closely about Lydia. He hadn’t even asked me if she’d been OK. He looked nothing like a disconsolate father whose daughter went missing. [...] Though his self-control might be professional. [...]

Chapter 6

[...] Max beckoned me over to the laptop. I sat down on a chair beside him and stared at the screen. The large headline was screaming, THE KIDNAPPING TURNS INTO MURDER. My stomach churned.

According to a source close to the District Attorney Office, as part of the investigation of the disappearance of Prosecutor C.’s daughter, the police examined the presumptive place of her confinement in one of the summer villages near Kyiv. [...] The house [...] greeted the police with a horrible surprise—a body of a male with the signs of foul play. [...] The police refused to comment when asked if the suspects included Prosecutor C.’s daughter or the US citizen. The investigation is still ongoing. [...]

Max broke the spell. ‘Confess. The corpse is your handiwork, isn’t it?’

‘Not funny,’ I grumbled.

‘Not funny at all,’ he agreed. ‘If the body’s been in that house for a couple of days Lydia and you become the chief suspects.’ [...]

[Alla’s] phone rang.

She answered it. ‘Hello,’ she said turning away from me. And suddenly her face fell. She listened to the person on the other end for some time. ‘No way,’ she finally said in a low voice hanging up. She slowly moved to the window and looked out. In a heartbeat she gestured to Max and me to come closer.

Spellbound by her weird gaze we looked down.

In the dorm yard where the local rules strictly forbid to park, two cars stood, one of them being a squad car. [...] Two field officers were standing by the squad car [...] looking at the entrance, and I followed their gaze in time to see the tail of the procession—two plain-clothes were stepping inside the dorm accompanied by the third field officer.

Alla explained, ‘I got a call from the custodian. She ordered me to take Tunguska and clear out immediately—’

‘What if she knew about Alex and me,’ Max said in a phlegmatic manner.

All of a sudden a crazy guess dawned on me. ‘That’s it. It’s related to the corpse. They have come to take me into custody!’ [...]

I jumped into my running shoes. Alex, a professional traveler, was already standing fully packed, holding Tunguska by the collar. Carefully, Alla cracked the door open and looked out. [...] We tiptoed across the foyer and entered a long hallway. Alla was the first to reach the fire escape at the end of it; she stepped onto the balcony, scanned the street and a moment later beckoned us to follow.

We darted along the hallway quietly and crowded on the balcony.

‘Should I rope Tunguska on to my back?’ Max suggested turning to Alex. ‘He isn’t a biter, is he?’

Tunguska’s hostile eyes clearly said that he is a biter.

‘He’ll climb down himself,’ Alex said impassively.

‘Are you kidding?’ we cried out in unison. ‘How?’

‘Backwards,’ Alex said stubbornly. ‘It’s easier for him to climb up than down but he’ll make it.’ [...]

Max shrugged and started climbing down.

He jumped onto the pavement and called in a muffled voice, ‘I’m waiting,’ and extended his arms like a groom at the wedding ready to scoop his bride.

Reluctantly, Alex fastened the leash to Tunguska’s collar. Immediately, the dog sulked.

‘Down,’ his master ordered and turned the dog’s butt towards the hole in the floor. And even as we watched, Tunguska started showing the miracles of equilibristics. [...] Tunguska put down his hinder leg on the first step and then, ever so carefully, got down the second hinder leg. [...] Helping himself with his muzzle Tunguska shifted his paws deftly, and in a little while he was already within Max’s reach. [...]

[Alla] hurried us up to the avenue where we hoped to get a ride.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked when we squeezed into a tiny car; under a thick layer of dust on its trunk I noticed a Tavria emblem and a faded sticker saying, I’M NOT LOANED THOUGH. [...]

‘I’m going to school,’ Alla said. ‘And you’ll have to stick around and wait for me in the Shevchenko Park. Then we’ll think what to do next.’ [...]

You might remember that my trip to Kyiv hadn’t been a road to nowhere. The Fulbright Office had rented an apartment for me and I’d mailed all my things there. [...]

‘I’m going to Fulbright,’ I said.

[Max drew a crude map for me.] So I went off. And even never got lost. I felt a little anxious entering the familiar building but nothing in the lobby reminded of the recent events. [...]

A presentation was coming to an end in the office. I saw a light brunette sitting at the table; the books in front of her looked so thick that could beat a brick. [...] A blonde, about the same age with

the brunette, was thanking the guests for coming and inviting to stay for drinks and buffet; I saw snacks and a couple of rather inviting bottles on the long side-table by the wall. Every wall in the room was covered with paintings like at an exhibition.

It was obvious that the blonde was the hostess of the office, so I darted to her as soon as the guests started getting up from their seats. She smiled expectantly. I introduced myself mumbling a little and she smacked her forehead.

‘Oh my God! That’s you! Where have you been, we’ve been looking for you everywhere.’

The blonde’s English was probably better than mine though a slight accent betrayed her local background.

‘For a long time I had no idea myself where I had been,’ I said. ‘I have a question about my apartment—’

The blonde said uncomfortably, ‘There’s a problem with the apartment. Since you hadn’t turned up in time we were forced to terminate tenancy—’

‘Where are my things then?’ I cried.

‘Relax. All your things are here. [...] I’ll bring you everything, and meanwhile you can grab something to eat...’

[...] the food on the side-table was most tempting. I pushed past people to a box of pretzels and popped one into my mouth. It tasted of nuts. Remembering about Alex and Max who were freezing on a park bench this very moment I had the cheek to grab a handful of pretzels and pocket it. Then I decided it was not enough and snatched a couple of candies. When I was pocketing a dozen crackers I was caught in the act by the brunette who’d been sitting at the table during the presentation.

‘I strongly advise you to try those cakes,’ she said in a conspiratorial voice gesturing at the tiny cream puffs in a large box. I turned scarlet.

Chapter 7

[...] Despite the age gap, the writer and I made friends very quickly... [...]

No sooner had she learned that I was homeless she took it to heart and started making phone calls. After two drinks, Dutch courage incited me to say, ‘Don’t forget I’m not alone—there’s a boy with a dog—’

‘And Prince Charming, I know,’ the writer said and put up her hand to silence me—she was talking on the phone. [...] ‘I’ve arranged everything! [...] A flat on Volodymyrska Street, they’re taking all three of you, to say nothing of the dog. The hostess is my old friend...’ [...]

I asked, ‘How much will it cost?’

‘Forget the money,’ the writer waved away the question generously as if it were her own flat...

[...] My eyes caught an ancient pink-and-grey brick house with black iron balconies supported by atlases. Grey caryatids held the archway the writer was turning to. The black iron gates blocking the entrance were open during the day. [...]

[The writer] pointed to the left, to the balcony on the second level. In the windows, the lights were shining merrily. [...]

Max whispered, ‘Where are we?’

‘It’s a safe flat,’ the writer winked at him, and this very moment the door opened and the hostess of the ‘safe flat’ appeared in the doorway accompanied by a boy of approximately Alex’s age.

‘Good afternoon,’ she said gesturing to us to come in. [...]

And in we came.

I've been to many places in my life but I have to confess that this little flat [...] will forever stay in my memory as one of the coziest places in the world. In the living room, there was a grey well-worn couch propped against the wall and a little oval light-wood coffee-table in front of it. Above the desk in the corner, a round clock was tick-tacking loudly, and there stood a bookcase right beside them. Several black office chairs by the wall seemed out of place in the living room but would certainly fit in with the adjacent room furnished as a study. On the right, the living room opened to a tiny kitchen, narrow as a hose, with hardly enough elbow room for two people. And all this seeming poverty was breathing with a special spirit of a warm home that welcomes a lot of people.

'Let's introduce ourselves,' the hostess said and told us her name, 'Nadia Mykolaivna. And this is Ruslan the Junior.' [...]

'Jenny.' I shook hands with her trying to repeat silently her elaborate name and failing. I could hardly say it, let alone remember it. [...]

'Is it possible that I will finally have a good night's sleep, without jumping at every sound?' I mused.

'Knock on wood,' Max sneered. [...]

Chapter 8

[...] Ding-dong. The sound was coming from the hall. Ding-dong! Whoever invented such a doorbell but it could raise the dead from the grave. I opened the door letting Mrs Nadia in.

'Hi! Where are the boys?' she asked.

'They went for a walk with Tunguska.'

'Right. I'm phoning Ruslan the Junior—they must be doing their homework now. Have you had lunch?'

'We have... Haven't you seen them in the courtyard? They might be coming back already. Let me see,' I said and, walking to the grilled window and leaning onto its wide window seat, looked out.

Even as I watched, a large black Jeep drove through the archway and with a screeching sound of the brakes came to a halt in front of our porch blocking the exit. I paled. I could see neither the driver nor the passengers through the tinted windows but the feeling in my guts told me they came after us. [...]

[Max said,] 'Time to take to heels.'

'Which way?' I cried. 'The exit is blocked. And they won't have the cheek to break the door, will they? Especially the iron door.'

'These people will,' Max said, and from the tone of his voice I believed him immediately that these people would break the door; I helplessly looked at Mrs Nadia. At this moment, one of the men went up the steps of the porch and started pressing the buttons of the digital lock.

Chapter 9

[...] Mrs Nadia also looked out of the window to make sure the intruders hadn't broken the code yet, and motioned us to pick up the most valuable things as quickly as possible and follow her. [...]

...We quietly descended to the cellar barred with a heavy lattice gate. On the key ring, Mrs Nadia picked a small round key that matched the lock perfectly.

'These cellars,' our hostess whispered, 'make a large spider web. Used to make, I mean. Today, they are mostly closed off but once upon a time you could have gone down under this building and

emerged in the Sophia Square. But all the cellars under the sections of this building are still connected, so we have a chance to get away unnoticed...' [...]

'Where are we going?' Max called. [...]

'My family has a half-built hotel,' Mrs Nadia explained. [...] 'There are a couple of livable rooms on the ground floor reserved for the construction workers. There are cots and potbelly stoves there, so you won't freeze to death. You might as well rough it there for a couple of days.'

'Thank you,' I said and all of a sudden my eyes watered. Yet again, a stranger rushed to save me without asking a word, and running a high risk. [...]

Finally, we reached a multistory brick box fenced by a metal hoarding. Most of the windows were already paned but here and there I saw black holes. [...] The cavernous lobby of the future hotel was so damp and uninviting that for a moment it felt colder than outside.

Mrs Nadia switched on a dim bulb in the ceiling and led us across the lobby deep inside the building, to two adjacent rooms equipped with primitive furniture—double-decked bunks by the walls, rickety tables covered with PVC tablecloths, and makeshift potbelly stoves I'd seen only in the movies about the American 1930s. [...]

Yurko arrived in an hour with two bags of food and drinks. I started unpacking them on the rickety table while Max asked suspiciously, 'No tail on you?'

'I am hurt,' Yurko said. 'I used to blow down communist monuments when it was not mainstream and never got caught.' [...]

Meanwhile, Max was absorbed in sausage cutting, delaying the inevitable moment when he would have to tell everything. However, it was impossible to delay forever because the tiny table was full to bursting and in the middle, Yurko placed a bottle of vodka, clear as spring water. [...]

'Well, I suggest we first have a drink,' Yurko said to Max, 'to help you start talking.'

He poured vodka into plastic cups, topped my cup with a generous portion of juice, and we clinked cups and drank. And stared at Max quizzically.

He looked like someone ready to jump into the ice hole.

'Remember the grenade?' he said finally. 'It was—it was me.'

Chapter 10

[...] 'We gathered a group to cross the northeastern border,' Max was telling us, 'to enter the conflict zone from the other side—'

'Who are "you"?' Yurko wanted to know.

Max started listing the names but they didn't ring a bell for me. [...]

'Frankly, it was my idea,' Max explained. 'When I was in the front line, one day a mortar shell fell in the village close to us, razing to the ground one of the houses. A local drunkard died there. We helped clear the debris to dig him out and arrange a proper funeral for him, and I found two passports among the broken furniture, an internal and an external one. Probably he had worked abroad before the war, I don't know... That was when the idea first occurred to me for... [...] I gave away the internal passport [...] but kept the external one. Later, back in Kyiv, I found some people who helped me glue my picture into the passport.' [...]

Yurko shook his head. 'I still don't get your brilliant idea. An ammunition depot on the hostile ground can be blown up by our sabotage forces... and they do it quite successfully.'

'I was not going to blow up an ammunition depot. No matter how many depots you blow up they will bring in more ammunition. If you want to blow something up it should be the command unit, and preferably when there are Moscow generals there...'

Max poured some of my juice into his cup, gulped it and went on. ‘Anyway, in a little while I found a handler from across the northeastern border who was supposed to meet me at the border and first take me to a training camp, and later on, to the conflict zone. [...] And then [...] I realized that my wonderful spy plan would not work. They would take me in at the border, and not alone but with the whole group. I would screw over four guys who trusted me. [...] I drank myself stupid and threw the grenade to thwart the border raid...’ [...]

‘OK, it explains the grenade,’ Yurko said, ‘but it does not explain the black Jeep hunting you today.’

Max looked uneasy. ‘Well,’ he mumbled, ‘I am definitely an idiot, I don’t deny it. I should not have started playing spy games when I did not have the slightest conception of it. After the grenade I laid low and cut short all communication with the handler—’ [...]

‘[...] But they tracked you down because the foe secret service wanted to know why you’d fallen off the radar, didn’t they?’ Yurko asked acidly. [...]

In the morning, the writer arrived on her sorry excuse of an SUV and brought Alla with her. [...]

[The writer] asked, ‘Who are these people?’

‘I am not sure,’ Max said. ‘I don’t even know the last name of my handler, just his first and middle names, and besides, how can I be sure they are not fake?’

‘Do you have his picture by any chance?’ [...]

In a minute, we all were staring at a grizzled man who looked about forty five; a featureless face, high cheekbones, bristly moustache. [...] But the writer copied his picture to a USB-stick, switched on her laptop and opened Twitter.

‘There are computer geniuses here who know everything. We’ll ask for help from the audience, so to say.’ [...]

In twenty minutes, the computer geniuses found a man who looked every inch the figure in our case. [...] It was an old newspaper article, from several years ago. An interview taken at Lake Seliger [Russian Federation] during yet another youth forum. The caption under the picture said, Sokurenko R. V., Major. [...]

The writer finally said, ‘I am not a good advisor in this case, but at the moment the safest place for Max is in custody.’

‘Are you kidding?’ Max snorted.

‘No, I am not. It is not easy to remove a person from the custody even for the secret service, especially for the secret service of a foreign country.’

‘I can’t,’ Max said miserably. ‘[...] I need to consult Yurko...’ [...]

He decided to negotiate with Yurko out of our hearing, so [...] he went out to have a smoke.

In ten minutes, he returned with his face blank. The three of us stared at him expectantly. I felt my heart pounding and my ears ringing.

Finally, Max said with reckless abandon, ‘That’s it. I am going to turn myself in.’

Chapter 11

One thing is to decide to turn oneself in, but how to do it, that is the question.

We spent two hours arguing what to do and whom to turn to. [...]

I said, ‘There’s a prosecutor we know.’

‘The Prosecutor C., whose daughter Lydia caused your captivity?’ Alla asked acidly.

‘The Prosecutor C., one visit to whom forced you to run away from the dorm?’ the writer tuned in with her.

‘The Prosecutor C., who is on the verge of arresting you for murder?’ Max joined in.

‘Yes, the Prosecutor C.,’ I said stubbornly; I had plenty of time to think over my arguments while they were arguing. ‘First, this is the District Attorney Office of the district we need, which means Max won’t be transferred anywhere. Secondly, Chopyk seems a nice guy to me. Thirdly, what I see is that you are looking for an excuse but Max made a decision and will have to turn himself in anyway.’ [...]

By the time we arrived at the District Attorney Office it was 4 p.m. already. [...] [Finally,] Max as a highly valuable witness was taken to the Lukyanivka Remand Prison... [...]

[Late at night,] I made myself tea and some sandwiches and took out Max’s laptop from his backpack to read the latest news. [...]

I scrolled down the Twitter feed but found nothing interesting except for one headline. LAST NIGHT A SECURITY SERVICE COLONEL JUMPED OUT OF A WINDOW. I opened the website of the online newspaper cited in the tweet, and a bloody scene blossomed on the white screen; a man with his neck twisted at an unnatural angle was lying in a puddle of blood on the pavement. [...]

The police received an urgent phone call at 5 a.m. Once a flying squad of the Dnipro District arrived on the spot they summoned the ambulance but it could only pronounce the death of the man lying on the pavement in an unnatural pose as if he had fallen from a high level. The police examined the building and saw an open window on the fifteenth floor which was somewhat unusual in November. When they went up to the apartment and knocked nobody would open the door, and once the crime scene investigation team arrived they decided to break in. Inside, they found the traces of some papers and electronic media hurriedly destroyed; however, nothing suggested there had been any intruders in the apartment which indirectly supports the suicide version. The sources close to the police revealed that the deceased was Colonel S. of the Security Service. This is not the first suicide in the upper echelons within the last couple of months. The readers might remember similar tragic deaths recorded... The article was supplemented with a whole list of hyperlinks, from recent ones to older ones.

I started opening the listed links one by one. The suicides were pouring as if from the cornucopia—there’d been five of them during my stay in Kyiv. The Army, the Attorney General’s Office, the Security Service—top officials committed suicide one after another. The journalists made various guesses but the official speakers kept mum.

I opened yet another link and stopped dead. From the page, one of my captors was looking at me—Greyhead who’d caught me and Lydia when we’d run out of the elevator. [...]

Chapter 12

[...] Alla, flushed and busy, burst into the flat with the autumn cold.

‘I got a visitation approval, I’m seeing Max in the Remand Prison, I need to gather some things for him quickly...’ [...]

...In a couple of minutes, we were crossing the blackened autumn park to Yaroslaviv Val [Street]. [...]

It was a long way, and finally Alla led me to a pink building that definitely looked like an ancient gaol. There were several people at the gates and I had no choice but to join them while Alla went to meet the lawyer. They disappeared together behind the door under the sign 13. A grim omen! [...]

...At last, [...] I saw Alla in the doorway. Even from a distance I could clearly see her frustration.

I darted to her. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘They would not let us in! They say nothing and just would not let us in. First they told us to wait—there’s a little waiting room there, all visitors have to sit together and wait—and then they announced that today’s visitation was cancelled.’ [...]

I saw Yurko in a distance. I waved to him but his reaction was spiritless. [...]

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. I don’t understand anything yet. The lawyer phoned me and told me to come over; they would not let him see Max, so we need to take measures. But the thing is... We had a couple of guys over at our place who helped us with renovations—after the grenade, you know... Well, secrets are never long-lived, so I told them that Max tuned himself in. And I told them who signed him in. And one of the guys says: his father is from Western Ukraine, twenty years ago he worked in Snyatyn and had a colleague named Chopyk...’

‘And?’ I urged Yurko on, feeling chills in my stomach.

‘About half a year ago, the guy’s father talked to this Chopyk, the one from Snyatyn. He has two daughters, and one of them is named Lydia. However, this Lydia had got married a couple of years ago and emigrated to the US as a refugee. [...] Now this Lydia lives in the US and has children, and she arranged for her sister to emigrate to the US as well. Half a year ago, this Chopyk, the one from Snyatyn, was going to retire and fly to the US together with his wife to visit their daughters.’

‘And?’ I urged Yurko on once again.

‘He never returned to Snyatyn but turned up in Kyiv,’ Yurko said. ‘I found out this part myself. I checked the property database and discovered that the Chopyks sold their flat in Snyatyn half a year ago.’

‘And what does that mean?’

‘It means that the Chopyk from Kyiv and the Chopyk from Snyatyn are two different people.’ [...]

Yurko took out a phone from his pocket and showed me three pictures from the 1990s, a little blurred but with the charm of olden time. [...]

‘My’ Prosecutor Chopyk [...] was dark-haired, with wide eyebrows and heavy features. This one, in the pictures, was blond, with pale eyes, a little nose and almost white eyebrows. [...]

Chapter 13

[...] But neither that day, nor the next day there was any news about Max. I spent several quiet days on Volodymyrska Street. [...]

One morning, [...] the doorbell rang. I got up from the sleeping bag [...] and went to open the door. [...]

I saw Alla and Yurko in the doorway. [...]

‘Are you on business or to visit?’ I asked.

Alla exclaimed, ‘We are right from the court! In the case of Student! He’s been awarded the posthumous war veteran status! His family will finally receive benefits! I can’t believe it!’

I asked, ‘You did find another witness?’

‘Yes, we did! We did! You know who agreed to be a witness? Movchun!’

‘Wait, who’s Movchun, I don’t remem—’

Alla started explaining no less excitedly, finishing her every sentence with an exclamatory mark.

‘Deputy Head of the Anti-Terrorist Center! It turns out he’d been in that sector at that time! He sent us his notarized testimony! He saved us!’ [...]

‘We decided to celebrate,’ Yurko interjected, his eyes shining, and took out of his pocket a half-bottle of some liquor. [...] I pulled two office chairs to the couch and placed mismatched shot glasses on the coffee-table... [...]

Yurko said, ‘Remember one of your captors was found murdered in the house you and Lydia’d been kept in?’

‘Sure. Redhead. I’d seen him at the Embassy the day before.’

‘[...] My sources say the murder weapon was the same revolver gun the other captor used to commit suicide—’

‘Greyhead?’

‘I guess. The older one, you told me—’

I nodded, ‘Greyhead.’ [...]

‘I also found out that this revolver gun had been a weapon in another case, an old one, and had been kept as a piece of evidence at one of the District Attorney Offices—’

I gasped. ‘The one where Prosecutor Chopyk works?’ [...]

‘Here comes the most interesting part.’

Yurko took his phone out of his pocket and found a picture. He handed his phone over to me. I looked down at the screen. Three guys wearing disruptive camo uniform and berets were standing embracing one another and looking insolently into the camera. For a heartbeat I was lost, but then I saw familiar features of ‘Prosecutor Chopyk’ in the face of the dark-haired guy, and standing beside him was—sure thing!—young and smiling Greyhead. The third guy was unfamiliar.

Yurko said, ‘Look, they definitely know each other—they served in the Army together.’

‘And the third one?’

‘No idea.’

‘He looks like Colonel Movchun a little!’ Alla said turning the phone to herself to look at the picture straight. ‘What do you say?’

‘Today, you’ll see Movchun in everybody, you’re a little in love with him,’ Yurko said. ‘I don’t see many similarities. But I have never seen him in person, only on TV—’

‘Prosecutor Chopyk found out who’d kidnapped his daughter and took revenge upon his old buddy?’ I mused. ‘But wait! We already know that Chopyk is not Chopyk in truth, and Lydia is not Lydia!’

‘That’s the problem,’ Alla nodded. ‘That’s the problem.’

‘Which reminds me,’ I said [...]. ‘In that house, Lydia said after one of the interrogations, Vault... Vault... No, it can’t be. They never do anything personally.’

‘Vault?’ Yurko repeated. ‘I’ve heard something like this not long ago... related to smuggling in no man’s land... [...]

Finally, Alla and Yurko drove on their way without having worked out any strategy... [...] Since nobody came to detain me, even though Prosecutor Chopyk had turned out false, I did not seem to be in any immediate danger, so I decided it was time to replace my lost passport. I contacted the Embassy and got an appointment today at 3 p.m. [...]

[...I] went outside and inhaled the cold air. [...]

A peach-colored building, hazy with frost, was towering on the left. The wooden lean-to restaurant stood November-still and empty, looking like a ship. All of a sudden, [...I] saw a little figure deep

inside the building [...]—strawberry-blond hair, [...] high cheeks, a snub nose, and big brown smiling eyes.

Chapter 15

I shuddered as if punched in the chest. My lungs heaving for air, I stood petrified in the middle of Volodymyrska Street, under the sign 47, not far from the cavernous entrance to the underground parking lot... [...]

‘Lydia!’ [...]

‘Don’t stand gaping in the street.’ Lydia tugged me closer, and I finally recovered. She looked a little thinner since last time. Where had she been hiding? From whom? From criminals or law enforcement? [...]

‘How come you are here?’

‘I’ve been waylaying you.’ She [...] pulled me by the sleeve deeper into the parking lot.

‘Wait. Where are you pulling me? I have an appointment at the Embassy at three o’clock—’

‘The Embassy? That’s a good idea. You’ll certainly be safer overseas... But if you’re going to the Embassy because of this,’ she took down her backpack and reached inside it, ‘you might as well cancel your visit.’

As if in slow-mo, first I thought, This backpack looks very familiar, and then it just clicked in my mind that it was mine indeed. And Lydia was holding my passport in her hand.

‘Where did you get it?’ I cried.

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Well, if I no longer need to go to the Embassy I don’t mind listening to your long story. After all, I am involved too.’ [...]

Lydia gestured to the guard at the gates and led me to the back of the parking lot. [...]

Lydia began her story. ‘It all started with the death of a well-known volunteer who helped the Security Service to trace the smuggling routes in no man’s land and zero in on the people who ran protection on this side of the battle line. [...] The investigation was progressing ever so slowly while the pieces of evidence would disappear one after another. However, several times the investigators stumbled across a charity fund financing startups. [...] The investigators who worked closely with the Secret Service decided to dig into the fund. I’d already worked with “Prosecutor Chopyk” on many other occasions, we were on a first-name basis, so I had no problem playing a role of his “daughter.” The idea was very simple—since the fund was registered in a certain district, “Chopyk” was planted in the respective District Attorney Office. He ran several unscheduled inspections of the fund but seemingly found nothing. Meanwhile, I pretended I was looking for a job and at the same time was putting on the ritz and chucking “my dad’s” money around. Quite soon, the fund opened a vacancy and I got a call from a recruiting agency; I was invited to work for the fund. They interviewed me and, just as we expected, tried to hook me up. In exchange for a lavish salary, I agreed to persuade “my dad” to stay away from a wonderful fund whose activities were so beneficial to Ukraine, for it raised money to finance young and promising entrepreneurs who dreamed of starting up their own business...’ [...]

‘So, your task was to collect information at the charity fund—’

‘Yes,’ Lydia nodded, ‘but it didn’t last long. First I thought I slipped somewhere, but now I know I was turned in. The break-in when you and I were captured—it was staged. All the cameras in the building were off. The raiders knew precisely what to do—they destroyed one important server and took several paper files with them because in a couple of days a task force was supposed to toss the office following my instructions. Neither you nor I were to be kidnapped. I was tailed to make sure I would be blocked in the elevator during the attack and have no way to interfere, but the raiders

didn't expect such pep from you. And I gladly agreed to what you proposed—I hoped I would have time to call my people. But then, out of the blue...' Lydia shook her head mournfully.

'Remember the greyhead we stumbled across when exiting the elevator?' she asked, and I nodded.

'I'll hardly forget either him or Redhead for the rest of my life.'

'Greyhead—he's one of us...'

I raised an eyebrow. 'A turncoat?' [...]

'Look. Greyhead was a close friend of "Prosecutor Chopyk." In their younger days, they'd served together in the military. So when Greyhead took us out of town I didn't know what to think. Can the "prosecutor," my direct lead in this operation, be playing a double game? He was the one who received all my information from the fund! By then, I trusted nobody and didn't know whom to turn to with my desperate suspicions, so after the escape, when you and I split accidentally, I decided to go into hiding. I had to know for sure whether Greyhead and "Chopyk" were accomplices or not. [...] So I went back to the house and saw a trailer across from it, on a neighboring lot. I decided it would be stupid not to seize a chance. I broke into the trailer, its windows looking on the house, and took a vantage point. They noticed our disappearance only in the morning when the trail went cold. At first, the two of them were running around the house in hot haste trying to figure out how we'd managed to get out, and then Redhead left hurriedly—'

'To catch me at the Embassy,' I explained. 'He made a good guess where I could go but, fortunately, I noticed him in time.'

Lydia nodded. 'I see. Well, Redhead left, Greyhead stayed. I'm sitting in the trailer, hungry and freezing, [...] when Redhead returns. A commotion starts in the house, I hear something crash down, and in five minutes Greyhead goes out, gets into the van and drives away. [...] I'm still sitting in the trailer and watching—and I don't understand anything. Redhead must be inside but the lights are out in all rooms though it's getting dark. I spent the whole night keeping an eye on the house, half-asleep and half-awake, but everything was quiet and Greyhead never came back. The next day I lost patience and went on a scout—'

'You bumped into Redhead and killed him,' I gasped. But where could Lydia get a revolver gun from?

'If I'd bumped into him I might have killed him,' Lydia chuckled, 'but somebody beat me. That sound when I thought something crashed down—it was a gunshot. Greyhead shot Redhead. He left the gun by the body. I guess he thought you'd go to the police and they would decide that we probably shot Redhead when escaping. You know, the revolver gun was mine, it was in my bag, "Prosecutor Chopyk" had given it to me for self-defense... Well, I wiped off our fingerprints on the upper floor, took our belongings and the gun, and returned to Kyiv. [There,] I traced down Greyhead—I knew where to look for him—and started tailing him. You can imagine my shock when all his travels were coincident with the suicides of the top security chiefs! He was mopping up his accomplices—there was no other explanation—'

Lydia stopped in mid sentence to catch breath and shook her head.

'You see,' she continued less emotionally, 'when we just started this case a name popped up, Vault, either a surname or a nickname. Everybody who tried to fight smuggling in no man's land would sooner or later get death threats from this mysterious Vault. He's most likely responsible for at least four deaths of the people involved in combat with smuggling. But what an almighty person could arrange four murders so that even the perpetrators never gave themselves away?'

'The Secret Service!' I gasped, and Lydia nodded gloomily.

'And I had a very promising suspect, Greyhead. So I risked to get in contact with him. His security system was carefully thought-out, of course, but he forgot we all had studied from the same textbooks. [...] [I pointed] a gun at him, and this turned the scales,' Lydia smiled crookedly. 'Once

Greyhead saw a familiar gun he knew everything and made no effort to negotiate with me; instead, he plunged at me... And I fired... [...] I shouted in warm blood, I know you are Vault, you are responsible for four deaths of our fellows-in-arms, but he jerked his head with an odd look on his face and croaked, No, I'm not Vault. You'd be very surprised—and passed out.' [...]

Thoughts swirled in my head. Lydia killed Greyhead. Lydia killed Greyhead! But if Greyhead was the last in chain, if that was him mopping up every person engaged in smuggling, as ordered by Vault, the case would never be cracked, would it?

'But,' Lydia looked up at me, 'at least I have an idea now who's Vault. You know him, too.'

I stared at her [...] and then I heard a familiar voice from the darkness, 'I am not Vault.'

In a heartbeat Lydia managed to push the wooden door, fall onto the concrete floor, roll over the threshold into the anteroom, and hide behind the door frame. [...]

'Prosecutor Chopyk' repeated, 'I am not Vault.'

'I don't believe you,' Lydia called from the anteroom.

'You have to believe me. [...] It was more than smuggling,' he shouted. 'Don't you understand? We took the wrong path from the start. Smuggling means big money, but not big enough to mop up all the eyewitnesses methodically.'

'Then what was it about?' Lydia asked skeptically, but I heard a note of interest in her voice.

'At first, I thought it was arms traffic, but we had only one case confirmed, and completely different people were involved—'

'So what was it?' I heard Lydia's voice from far away; she must have opened her secret passage already and would be gone again in a moment.

'Drug trafficking from the invaded areas.'

'What?'

'Drug trafficking from the invaded areas,' he repeated. 'Large lots hidden in the coal and other goods. This no man's land is a green corridor from Asia to Europe. The drug dealers have never dreamt of such conveniences—'

'And the fund?' Lydia asked.

'Just a laundry. One of many. We've almost cracked the case, arrested two big lots at the demarcation line lately, the whole structure is crumbling, nobody will come out dry, I'm sure, even Vault. But we need your testimony, too, Lydia. The case might fall apart without your testimony.'

'I don't believe you.' [...]

'I swear.'

'When you take the case to court I'll come and give my testimony, I promise,' Lydia said in a muffled voice, then I heard a clang of metal, and in a moment everything went still. Lydia ran away again.

'Shit,' the 'prosecutor' swore. 'Shit, shit, shit!'

'Listen,' I lifted up my head, and the false prosecutor jumped as if he'd completely forgotten about my presence, 'I wonder why Lydia haven't asked the most important question. Who's Vault?'

Chapter 16

From early morning, the flat on Volodymyrska Street was in fuss. My Fulbright Scholar Program ended, and with it, my head-spinning Kyivan holiday ended, too. I packed and sent away most of my things the way they'd come in, and now I was trying to squeeze the rest in twenty kilos to be allowed on board. [...]

The backpack was full to bursting, and I had no idea how to fit my tablet in it. Once my tablet returned to me thanks to Lydia, I secretly downloaded Max's war pictures from his laptop. My heart faltered at the thought of Max... [...] Several weeks passed, and we still knew nothing about him.

A TV-set was droning up in the corner... [...]

Sprightly music replaced the droning, and in a moment the newscast started.

'We open this broadcast with a sensational piece of news. As we've just learned from our staff reporter who's streaming from the Obolon District Court, twenty minutes ago the first session in the case of the drug trafficking in no man's land did start. The chief witness, Major Lydia Panaschenko of the Security Service, who was kidnapped together with a US citizen a month ago, has come to court and is ready to give testimony today. Her main demand was an open court hearing...'

Lydia's face appeared on the screen; she was standing in the hallway, with a heavy escort of guards, and looking me right in the eye as if we weren't tens of miles apart. Bye, Lydia, I thought, I wish you victory in this hybrid war...

'...The main suspect in this high-profile case became known only today,' the newscaster was telling from the screen. 'The sources close to the Attorney General's Office say one of the deputy heads of the Anti-Terrorist Center was detained at Boryspil Airport the day before yesterday when trying to board a flight to Minsk, Belarus...'

The TV-screen showed footage from the airport. The arrest was lightning quick, and in a heartbeat we saw the face of the detainee, intentionally blurred but not enough because Mrs Nadia said suddenly, 'Oh no, this is Colonel Movchun!' [...]

My jaw dropped. The Colonel Movchun. The third guy from the picture... [...]

'I can't believe it's him, I can't believe it!' Alla cried out interrupting my thoughts. 'The very Movchun who sent us his notarized testimony so that Student could get a posthumous war veteran status? He was the only one who agreed to help when everybody else shied away from it. I can't believe this is him!'

'I've got it!' I heard myself saying when an inexplicable realization dawned upon me. 'Where did your Student die, at Stanytsia Luhanska? What if his death is one of the links in the chain of drug trafficking? What if it was easier for Movchun to help his family than to wait for you to unearth something incriminating while searching for his war buddies?' [...]

The farewell was a little awkward; I hugged all the women one by one, shook Tunguska's paw, [...] and kissed Alex placing him in trustworthy hands of Mrs Nadia. [...] Today, by the end of the day Minnesota time, I would be home. I could not believe it! I would not forget my Kyivan holiday for the rest of my life. [...]

Before I knew it I reached the end of the subway line. I stepped out of the carriage and slowly walked to the exit, my feet shuffling and my head low. Kyiv wouldn't let me go, my heart fluttering as if tugged by a thin thread tied up deep inside the ancient city. I sighed and made a long step to break finally this illusive thread, but was caught by strong arms. [...]

Immediately, my nostrils recognized his familiar smell. Then I looked up slowly and drowned in his grey eyes that haunted me by night.

'You weren't going to run away without saying good-bye, were you?' Max said laughingly wrapping his arms around me and kissing me in the middle of the station.

'Why are you kissing me?' I chirped. 'What about Alla? What about Alla?'

'Alla? What does she have to do with it?' Max said, puzzled, falling back and then laughed having realized what I meant. 'You've got it wrong! Alla's my cousin.'

And immediately, like every white-skinned redhead, I flamed up. [...]

‘Where have you been?’

‘In a covert jail of the Secret Service. Haven’t you heard these spook stories?’

‘???’

‘Well, I actually spent some time on 33 Volodymyrska Street [at the Secret Service Office], but mostly in various offices instead of horrible dungeons... In a nutshell, I helped uncover a whole chain of terrorist recruiters. My handler got caught at the border, some of his men managed to escape across the northeastern border, but it won’t save them. I cannot share the details, I signed a pledge of secrecy, you’ll read everything in newspapers later. Jenny, I promise you, it will be a headline-making case, as good as yours. [...] Well, let’s go, or you’ll miss your plane,’ Max smiled tugging me by the hand. ‘Though come to think of it, it’s even better if you miss your flight, isn’t it, Jenny?’

We emerged from the subway, and I inhaled wet Kyivan air. Winter set in, the snow crunched underfoot, but at that moment I could smell a rich and sweet breath of spring.