

The bright sun of a May morning in Moscow streamed through the kitchen window. Anya Volkova waited for her breakfast to pop out of the toaster. Her mother's querulous voice called out from the other room.

"Anya, what did you do with my glasses? Where did you put them?"

Anya sighed. Her mother always thought everything was Anya's fault. As if she'd deliberately hidden the glasses to annoy her.

"I didn't put them anywhere. Look on the table by your bed. You were reading last night."

"You must have moved them. I don't see them."

"Look again."

The toaster kicked a piece out onto the floor. Anya picked it up and spread a little jam on it. She leaned over the kitchen sink and took a bite, careful not to let any crumbs fall on her freshly pressed uniform. If she didn't leave soon, she'd be late for work at the Ministry. There was no time for a proper breakfast. She'd get something at the canteen later.

Her mother shuffled into the kitchen. She had been a beauty in her youth, but time and circumstance had taken it from her. The Soviet years had not been kind to Russia's women.

Yulia Volkova's fondest memory was of being taken to a May Day celebration in Red Square when she was five. Leonid Brezhnev had been in the reviewing stand, surrounded by unsmiling men in uniforms and dark overcoats. She'd watched in awe as the missiles and tanks rolled by. Yulia never tired of telling Anya about the greatness of the Soviet era. Her husband would have agreed with her, if he were still alive. Soviet greatness was one of the few things they had ever agreed on.

"Where's my breakfast?"

"I don't have time to fix your breakfast, mother. There's bread and eggs. You'll have to make something for yourself."

"If your father were here, he would have made sure you had something ready."

"If my father were here, he would probably be too drunk to care."

"Anya! Don't talk about him like that."

"I have to go."

A wheedling tone entered her mother's voice. "I need you to take me shopping."

"Mother, it's Friday. I have to work today. You know I can't take you shopping until tomorrow. You'll have to wait. Your tea is on the table."

Yulia sat down heavily and picked up the cup in both hands. She sipped and made a face.

"Too hot."

Anya finished her toast, brushed crumbs from her fingers. She looked at her mother, grown old and unhappy, and felt a sudden wave of sympathy. Life hadn't been easy for Yulia Volkova.

"I'll bring you a nice dessert from the canteen. "

"If Mikhail was here, he would take me shopping."

Her mother never missed a chance to remind Anya of her failings. Bringing up her younger brother was like a slap in the face. Mikhail was never going to take Yulia anywhere. At the sound of his name, Anya felt the old familiar sadness.

Mikhail had joined the army to gain the admiration of his sister and older brother, Grigori. Eight months later he was dead, killed in a meaningless training accident caused by the incompetence of his commander.

The wound festered in Anya's soul. It would have helped if she could talk about her little brother with someone other than her mother and Grigori, but there wasn't anyone. No one close to hold her when the dark clouds gathered. No one to tell her things would be all right.

Choosing a military career had made it difficult to find the right someone. Most of the men she had met were interested in sex, not relationship. The last man she'd allowed into her life had been incapable of seeing her as anything but an extension of himself. That had been a few years back. Since then there'd been no one. Anya had almost become resigned to the idea that there might never be someone. That didn't keep her from hoping things would change.

"Goodbye, mother. I'll be back at six. There's soup in the refrigerator for your lunch."

She paused in the hall to check her uniform and pushed a wisp of dark brown hair under the high-peaked officer's cap on her head. Dark marks under her eyes emphasized their brilliant green color. Long days at work had a way of taking their toll.

"Remember to..."

Anya stepped into the hall outside the apartment and pulled the door shut after her, cutting off her mother's words. Their relationship had never been easy. Sometimes it was all Anya could do to keep from shouting at her. After Mikhail died, it had gotten worse.

Anya and Yulia lived inside the Ring on Maskova Street, one of the better streets in Moscow's Basmanny District. She'd lived there most of her life. The large apartment had belonged to her father, a perk of his high rank within the SVR, the successor to the old Committee for State Security, the KGB. His father had been a Colonel in the KGB before him. She'd never known her grandfather, who had served in the NKVD under Stalin and Beria. If he was anything like her father, she hadn't missed out on anything.

In the complicated relationships of power that affected everything in Russia, Anya's family history made her part of the privileged elite. She'd broken with the family tradition of serving in the security services, wanting nothing to do with spying on people who might turn out to be friends and neighbors, but she was patriotic. She'd wanted to serve her country. It was why she'd joined the military.

Her background meant she was watched. After she'd graduated from officer training and her competence became obvious, she was fast-tracked for promotion. By the time she was thirty, Anya had reached the rank of major. She was trusted. As she rose through the ranks she'd demonstrated superior organizational skills. Two years before, she'd been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and assigned to her current position in the Ministry of Defense.

Anya worked in Combat Services Support, supervising a unit of five hundred people. CSS was responsible for maintaining the combat readiness of Federation forces. It was a grueling job, requiring high security clearance and periodic vetting by the GRU, military intelligence.

The apartment wasn't far from the Metro stop at Krasniye Vorota. Anya walked down the street, enjoying the sunshine. She passed a bulbous, egg-shaped house of red brick that was one of Moscow's tourist attractions. The house was on the market for an

outrageous sum, millions of rubles. As she walked by, she wondered why anyone would pay that kind of money for an old building that was sure to have all sorts of problems.

*Who'd want to live in a place like that? Every time you looked out the window you'd see strangers peering at you, taking pictures.*

She took the steps down into the Metro, through the turnstile and down a long escalator. A train pulled in as she stepped onto the platform.

Metro service in Moscow was fast and efficient. Nineteen minutes later she got off and changed trains. The next stop was Arbatskaya Square, where the Ministry of Defense was located.

MOD headquarters was built from blocks of light-colored stone. A black iron fence decorated with gold painted points ran around the perimeter. Tiny areas of grass inside the fence did nothing to soften the hard, bureaucratic look of the massive building.

She went in through the main entrance, showed her ID to the guards at the security station, and took an elevator to the fourth floor. The doors opened onto an enclosed area. A man in uniform with a holstered pistol on his belt sat at a desk facing the elevator. Behind him was a closed door. He started to get to his feet. Anya waved him down.

"At ease, Senior Sergeant. Good morning."

"Good morning, Colonel."

Senior Sergeant Yevgeny Popov was there to make sure no one without proper authorization got through the door in the wall behind him. He'd been wounded in Chechnya and ended up behind this desk.

The Army was a difficult place for women, a charged environment of sexual harassment and frequent sabotage by their male counterparts. At first Popov hadn't liked the idea of having a woman for a commander. Then the bureaucracy had threatened to cut his pension benefits, and Anya had intervened on his behalf.

As far as Senior Sergeant Popov was concerned, she could do no wrong.

"It's a beautiful day out there, Colonel."

"I think spring is finally here," Anya said.

No one who wasn't Russian could understand what those words meant to someone who lived in Moscow. The mind numbing cold of the Russian winter had gone and the oppressive heat of summer had not yet arrived. Popov pressed a button under his desk and the door behind him clicked open. Anya went through.

Rows of painted columns marched down the length of the room, supporting the floors above. The huge space was filled with a sea of cubicles and computers. Her office was at one end of the room, raised above floor level, with a large glass window that allowed her to look out over the mix of civilian and military workers.

Anya's domain.

From time to time she wondered what life would be like if she'd chosen another occupation, but those were only passing fancies. She was working for her country. The pay wasn't good, but her rank brought privileges unavailable to most of the civilian population.

Even so, sometimes she wished she'd landed in a different job.

Something less boring.

Later, she would remember that thought.

