

## PART ONE

### Chapter 1

1

They picked me up early in the morning of 15 August 1996. In Moscow. Two of them took me. They walked up, asked to see my ID and politely ushered me across to the car. They opened the door smartly and correctly, with all the airs and graces of a commissionaire, but shoved me inside without any ceremony.

The first one, who smelled of onions and old foot-wrappings, got into the driving seat, turned to me and said, with a glint of a cheap yellow gold tooth:

“Now tell us where the Lefortovo district is in this Moscow of yours. We’re not local, you know.”

I was dumbfounded. I didn’t understand. Was a newly apprehended villain supposed to show the sleuths the way to jail? And then, why straight to jail? What about proof?

The capital of an empire is a special kind of city. No curious crowd gathered round in an instant. People hurried past, averting their eyes. Only one, a youngish man, slowed down and inclined his head slightly to look in through the windows of the car at the pale-faced arrestee. But the palm of a hand was rudely slapped against the transparent barrier from the inside:

“Move along!”

The curious youth gave a violent start and hurried on, tugging down his jacket. My jacket cost about fourteen times as much.

“Turn right at the traffic lights,” I said despondently. “Then keep going straight along the embankment ...”

And so the victim showed his executioner the way to the scaffold. I would have relished the absurdity of the moment, but I was feeling too afraid. After all, it was the first time I’d ever been arrested. I was being taken in for

intensive interrogation at the very least. And in the worst case, I was being transported from the realm of freedom to the realm of compulsion.

From a world of Japanese computers, Cuban cigars, French cognac, genuine port from Portugal, Swiss chronometers, gold cufflinks, whispering air-conditioners, two-hundred-dollar fragrances, linen trousers, crocodile-skin briefcases, silk shirts, glamorous magazines, bullet-proof glass, polished limousines and seven-figure bank accounts – straight to a place where they fed you crude skilly.

But if they'd managed to get to me, that didn't mean they would get to my money. They'd been looking for me for two months. On suspicion of embezzling a million American dollars from the state treasury. And now they'd caught me.

I hadn't stolen the million. I don't like stealing and I don't know how to do it. So now I didn't completely lose my presence of mind. These were changed times, they didn't put innocent people away behind bars any more. Changed times, gentlemen! On my way to Lefortovo prison, I was surrounded by the noise and bustle of the hot, nervous summer of nineteen ninety-six. Only a couple of weeks earlier the country had re-elected its first president for a new term. In doing so, it had chosen democracy. And in democracies, as far as I was aware, only a court could deprive a man of his freedom.

The morning had turned out bright and very warm. We drove for a long time through a city that was barely awake and gradually growing warmer, drove through the quivering air, through the thick yellow sunlight slanting down from the dusty crowns of the trees along the road. Jammed fast in the herd of traffic, our car moved slowly. I was sitting all alone in the back seat and could easily have jumped out as we drove along: tried to escape, made a run for it through the courtyards and the side streets. But why should I? I hadn't done anything. I'd just explain everything to them and before lunch I'd be back in my office, where the computer screens glittered as money appeared and disappeared on them, shifting and shimmering. Along the way I was deliberately rude to them. They had addressed me too familiarly and I told them what I thought about it. The police agents were furious and for a while they said nothing.

The car dodged through the traffic for a long time before it finally drove into a series of yards and stopped in front of a massive building with no sign on it.

"Looks like we're here."

One of the two immediately turned to me and grabbed my nose between his bent fingers. The August heat had made his hands and my nostrils moist and slippery, so the joke was only half successful. I jerked back and freed myself from his grasp, but even so the sudden pain and humiliation brought tears to my eyes.

"Now we're going to take you in there with us," I heard. "And then we'll see who's the polite one."

Behind the massive doors there was a large lobby. An embrasure in the wall, covered with metal mesh. A pale functionary in a grey cap looking out curiously from behind it.

“Face the wall,” the one who had attacked my nose said briskly. “Stand facing the wall! Move!”

He chuckled to the pale-faced duty officer and nodded towards me:

“Just look what a fine Rockefeller we’ve caught.”

He was obviously talking about my suit. The jacket and trousers looked pretty expensive, and they were.

They led me along corridors with complicated twists and turns and shoved me into a room that was large but extremely stuffy. There were several dour looking men in shirts with rolled-up sleeves, sitting on the chairs and tables, smoking. All of them were older than me, and much bigger. I suddenly felt rather uncomfortable.

Several hoarse voices spoke at once.

“Oh, so you’ve caught him, have you?”

“Well, what did you think? We caught all the rest and we’ve caught this one too.” And then, speaking to me again: “Face the wall!”

“We haven’t searched him,” said the second one who had arrested me, concerned. “What if he’s got a weapon?”

“That’s right! Up against the wall! Spread your legs!” – that was to me again.

I stood as I was told, and spread my legs.

I didn’t like the wall. Rough, lumpy plaster covered with streaky, old green oil paint, it had a depressing, almost obscene look. The kind of wall Pink Floyd ought to sing about.

They went through my pockets deftly and rapidly, extracting three mobile phones, a passport, a notebook, a heavy bundle of keys and about half a kilogram of money in two currencies. They flung the money on the nearest table with genuine indifference. But the notebook aroused great professional interest. Continuously stimulating themselves with nicotine, the sleuths leafed through the precious item of material evidence, handing it back and forth to each other, and then took it out of the room, evidently for a more detailed analysis of the contact details of my friends, acquaintances, relatives, colleagues, business partners, clients and all the other men and women who fell within the orbit of my carefree life.

“Sit on a chair!”

The door opened and another two men entered hurriedly, followed by a third. They’d obviously come running to catch a glimpse of the newly captured criminal.

“At last, Andriukha! If you only knew how tired we are of running around after you.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Where do you think you’re sitting?” they roared in my face. “You’re not in your office now! Sit over there, nearer the light!”

With an effort, I managed to abstract myself from the situation and see these men as amusing monsters. They were trying to look frightening, jangling their handcuffs and battered Makarov pistols. They strode around the room, clomping heavily, with their elbows struck out sideways, as if they had extra sets of male genitals dangling under their armpits, one on the right, one on the left. The way long-serving army men walk. Or cowboys in classic westerns.

I had to admire their attitude, it was simple and honest: compared to them I was shit, a pup, a little kid, an unscrupulous liar. A bad man. A lover of easy money, Mercedes automobiles and girls. The state paid its servants poorly, and the servants felt a natural class hatred for nouveau-riche juveniles.

“I know where he’s headed,” one of them said to another. “He’s going down for a long stretch. And that’s right!”

They were trying to intimidate me with the idea of prison. But I’d been ready for it for a long time. I’d prepared for it in advance. And what I felt now was not so much fright as a bizarre combination of exultation and horror.

I thought the most amusing detail of the interior was the ashtrays. They were made out of matchboxes with the foil from cigarette packs painstakingly glued over them – handicraft work by prisoners.

It soon became clear that the entire investigating team consisted to a man of provincials on assignment to Moscow. The detectives and criminal investigators had been transferred to the capital from Saratov, Penza and Chelyabinsk, given rooms in a hostel and ordered to work. To seek out criminals who had embezzled money from the state. By creating a team entirely out of strangers, the militia top brass had intended to exclude the possibility of graft. After all, their local Moscow personnel were corrupt, fused inextricably into a system of relatives, friends and lucrative acquaintances. But the newcomers didn’t know anyone, they had no family or friends here. And what’s more, a provincial assigned to the capital works like a demon – if his efforts are appreciated he might just not be sent back to Penza!

And the result of all this was that I was now bearing the full brunt of their xenophobia and profound contempt for a pampered inhabitant of the pampered capital

But I didn’t let that bother me: I myself had only come to this city five years earlier – I was a newcomer, just like they were. An alien. A visitor. The son of two teachers, raised in the country.

The atmosphere of the large, gloomy building found appropriate expression in the grimly abusive language. The monotonous drone of plain peasant obscenities filled the corridor and the office itself. As crude as the blow of an axe against a tree, the slang grated on my ears and set my nerves on edge.

I estimated things were moving at a pretty mediocre pace. And I noted

that down as their mistake. A guy like their newly apprehended suspect should have been made to talk quickly, no time wasted. Wham-bam – and there's your client already providing evidence!

But no. They circled round me, taking my measure. Walking in and out of the room. One of them would come in, yell some crude insult at me, give me a kick and then beat a hasty retreat; another would reassure me, question me ingratiatingly, slap me on the shoulder, offer me a cigarette, but then also withdraw into one of the adjoining rooms; a third would come on all aggressive, a real brute, yelling and abusing me, with a putrid stench erupting from his mouth, and I could see that his teeth were rotten and his cheeks were covered with pimples ...

The sleuths took a long time, softening up their newly captured villain, too long. They ought to have broken me in half an hour. Subdued my will straight away. Copied Gestapo tactics. Ties and white shirts. Clever, terrifying questions. A lamp in my face. No time to think or analyse what's going on. Who? Where? The circumstances? The facts! The truth! The real truth! Stick to the point!

But no – they wasted time, gave me a chance to observe, correlate and draw conclusions. And to figure out that the servants of the law knew a great deal about me, but not everything. Including what was most important

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I'm twenty-seven years old.

I'm a businessman. A banker. More precisely, the joint owner of a bank. Even more precisely, a junior partner. I'm rich. And I've just been arrested for misappropriating state funds.

My bank is a very small one, not many people have even heard about it, but – an important point – it is entirely independent and perfectly stable. In addition – and even more importantly – it is expanding rapidly. This bank sprang up out of nothing in about three years. My bank. My brainchild, my offspring, the meaning of my entire life, the devourer of my time and my nerves, a source of incredible profit. Its name doesn't appear on advertisement hoardings, those model types with wide mouths don't read it out to people from their TV screens. And thank God for that.

Of course, the principal of the entire business, the founder of the firm, the number one, is not me, but someone else. My senior colleague, the boss, the chief. Mikhail Nikolaevich Moroz.

He was the one who agreed the terms for the transit of that cursed million dollars. I'm only a subordinate. A clerk. A technical operative. I was told what to do and I did it. Implemented the boss's decision.

They've picked up my superior and boss Mikhail too. Today. Half an hour after me. Outside the door of our offices. I've gathered that from snatches of conversations. But they'll let my boss go. And my job is to