

A WOUNDED PANTHER

At that very moment Victoria Glebovna walked along the sections of a pricey food store. She bought a can of red caviar, three hundred grams of salmon on skin, a French loaf, a stick of butter, a lemon, and a bunch of grapes. Throwing a look at her watch, she began to hurry. She almost forgot to buy a bottle of the red Spanish wine which her friend Jose Rodriguez liked so much. She remembered everything so clearly, as if watching a documentary. She couldn't stop shivering. Having been promoted to the rank of Major, she barely managed to clock out the twenty calendar years necessary to earn a pension. And at this moment the '91 happened, USSR fell apart and the tsunami of the new life tore through the country, knocking down old foundations and old ideas. She stopped and took stock of her life: an eighty-dollar pension the state decided she had earned, a husband who couldn't make a Colonel's rank, an idiot son and a boundless ocean of energy, a thirst for this new sparkling and bubbling life.

For twenty years she lived as a little grey Top Secret KGB mouse. And then the curtain opened: she was on stage as a full-breasted, alluring and venturesome leading actress, and the play seemed to have been written especially for her. So she had transformed herself, and did it so well that even Stanislavsky himself wouldn't find a cause to reproach her. Of course there was a price to pay, but it didn't seem so important compared to the enchanting life Victoria Glebovna had been leading for the last three years.

The first time she went abroad was as a part of a group sent to Spanish seaside hotels on a promotional tour. The travel company had covered all their expenses. Victoria Glebovna had nervously fingered her small wallet where she kept two hundred dollars Korney had bought for roubles; her plump cheeks were flushed red. Those were the first dollars she had ever touched.

On the third day of the tour she met the son of the owner of the five-star hotel, 30-year-old Jose Rodriguez. Under the pretext of showing her the new tourist route he invited Victoria to sail to Gibraltar with him on his yacht, to see the Hercules Cave and to take a dip in the Lovers' Night bay. Really, could anybody have resisted such an invitation? At last she came close to the waterfall of life and her inner voice whispered seductively, "Drink up, life's too short!" So she leaned towards this well, drinking greedily to quiet the awful thirst of her soul.

Shy Jose did everything to please the impulsive Russian woman. Their white yacht seemed to be flying over the amethyst waves; the wind tore the hat from her head and the May sun caressed her naked arms and shoulders.

Finally the yacht came to rest in a small cove. Sitting on the deck under a sunshade they drank light wine looking at white cliffs. Jose spoke about the history of those places, about the maritime battles, fierce pirates and the treasures they had left in the cove's caves. At the same time he couldn't turn his eyes away from Victoria Glebovna's rounded thighs and generous breasts barely covered by her swimsuit. The temperamental Spaniard touched her shoulders and arms from time to time; he told her he was unmarried and that he had fallen in love. They spent the evening in a restaurant and danced a lot, enjoying the staff's special attention. Jose made the small orchestra play a tango they both loved. Victoria Glebovna spent that starry, moonlit night with Jose on a small empty villa belonging to his father. The terrace where they sat embracing at a wicker table looked into a rocky lagoon. Meteorites fell through the sky, growing dim over the sea. Small fish looking like droplets of quicksilver kept jumping out of the darkness of the sea to escape from the predators chasing them. Oleanders sang with cicada voices. Jose leaned towards her, kissing her lips.

For Victoria Glebovna everything was happening for the first time: first forbidden kiss, such a quick closeness with a man and such a romantic setting. Perhaps she was doing something wrong; her lover was hurried and

nervous. In the early morning he tried once again and this time their intimacy also was quick and explosive. It's probably the South, she decided, and then left that thought alone.

Summer nights are tender, but she had to rejoin her tour group before dinner. After a swim in a small pool they drank coffee while smoking light cigarettes and started talking about business. Victoria told him about her dream to open a travel agency which was, regretfully, not possible for her right now. Or ever, since she had no chance of getting so much money. Jose inquired just how much money one needed to start a decent business in Russia. After her answer he opened his black eyes wide: to get a hundred per cent return in a year Victoria Glebovna needed five thousand US dollars. She offered Jose a part in her plans, speaking with passionate conviction, defending her idea. Three thousand dollars to buy a room for an office and two to buy office equipment. She forgot about herself; developing her idea was the important thing. Her business plan made an impression on Jose by its clarity, expressiveness, brevity and the prospect of doubling the profit. Yes, they would become partners, he decided; Jose would one-up his father and wouldn't need to depend on him any more. They agreed to split the profits and to call the company 'Love Lagoon'. His father approved the idea and gave them ten thousand dollars in ready money, noting that the modest Russian woman had forgotten to count in her own salary.

In the airplane Victoria kept petting her colourful bag with money hidden under its lining. When she and Jose parted, he reminded her of her love and said she was the only one to recognize his passionate soul. "Oh Jose," said Victoria Glebovna, kissing his cheek, "now you understand how much a pure love costs." Jose gave her the answering white-toothed smile of a child who ate too many sweets.

Victoria Glebovna's energy was boundless. In a short time she managed to put her business on a grand scale. The Love Lagoon was one of the first companies to start doing foreign passports for Russian citizens at an express

rate, which was a source of tax free superprofits. Her success was due mostly to her good connections and also to her useful talent for sharing her joys and her profits with friends. During the first months she bought out an almost-destroyed room in a shared apartment on the first floor. Towards the end of the first year she moved two other families living in that flat to other quarters. Now she had a spacious enough office and two employees. Every three months she went for several days to Spain, and later to other Mediterranean countries, to widen her outlook and strengthen business contacts, as she used to say.

Every six months Jose flew to Saint Petersburg to get his share, two or three hundred dollars in an envelope which Victoria Glebovna gave him together with a solemn lecture on the difficulties of earning this, on the problems with the Russian mafia and troubles with evading taxes. Jose gazed adoringly at his Russian heroine, inching closer to her enticing form.

On his previous visit Victoria Glebovna had surprised the Spaniard by a new and wondrous plan. The initial investment would have to be thirty thousand dollars. "A sweet thing," Victoria Glebovna said. "Just imagine, I buy a rose for fifty cents and sell it for three dollars. How do you like it?"

"So we're going to get three hundred thousand; and what about the overhead costs?" her partner inquired meticulously. Victoria Glebovna closed his mouth with her hand. "You shouldn't bother with such technical details. I need you alive and well." Jose couldn't very well object to such reasoning. "It's just that Father said we should do a business plan for the new idea," he said timidly. "Tell your father he's a fool. I want to make you two multimillionaires, and you keep bringing up some silly formalities. Doesn't he trust me?". "He does," Jose usually answered. "Then let him get the money," Victoria Glebovna said, ending the discussion. Jose's father sent her the sum required.

This way Victoria Glebovna got a tiny flower shop and then three temporary stands near subway stations.

All would have been well if her business successes hadn't made Victoria

Glebovna lose caution. She was well-protected from small-time racketeers who often checked the “protection” of small businesses by the unshakeable authority of the State Security Special Troops Veterans’ Association. When young guys in leather jackets and dark hats asked, “Who are you paying, woman?”, her tradeswomen said calmly: “To the State Security special troup”. Then the young bandits quickly disappeared.

About three months ago she had a call from the district tax inspection. A section chief who was a friend of Victoria Glebovna told her about an ice-cream deal with a fantastic return profit, five dollars for each dollar invested. He said that he himself wasn’t in because of the lack of funds. Victoria Glebovna hinted that his interest wouldn’t go unrewarded. That very day a young athletic-looking man named Igor appeared in Victoria Glebovna’s office. He introduced himself as a suppliers’ representative and showed her the necessary documents.

The company supplied ice-cream to the Russian market and only worked wholesale; their minimal lot was a forty-pound container priced at sixty thousand US dollars. Naturally, this was meant to be a ‘black’ deal, that is, using unregistered cash. Igor explained with a smile that Victoria Glebovna was lucky: they had a container that passed the customs already but wasn’t yet sold. However, she had to pay today, or the goods would slip away. She did not have so much money ready, but she was sorry to miss the opportunity. Igor’s good looks and frankness inclined her to trust him, and the company was too well-known on the food market to doubt its reliability. There would be no problem in selling this; a container of the goods of such level would be bought out rapidly, in two weeks, three at most. Victoria Glebovna studied the documents closely once more. She thought they were real.

“Tell me, Igor, why don’t you want to deal with the retail seller directly?”

“You see, Victoria Glebovna, I work for a salary and see no harm in selling at least one container out of ten through a firm that will pay me ten per cent out of the sum of the profits.”

“But I won’t be able to get the money today. I am sorry.”

“Are you upset about that?”

“Of course. Who knows if I can find such a deal tomorrow. The prices can change.”

“You’re saved, Victoria Glebovna!” Igor exclaimed. “I know an old man who will lend you the money at fifteen per cent of interest in a month. But if you agree you’ll get your money back with a profit in two weeks at most. You will get two hundred thousand tax free.”

His arguments were impossible to resist. She’d be a fool to lose an opportunity to get a good profit.

“All right, Igor, call your old man,” Victoria Glebovna agreed. “I’ll be waiting for him here.”

In forty minutes two men dressed in identical sweatsuits entered Victoria Glebovna’s office. Silently they gave her the money package and then asked her to count the bills and to write a standard IOU for sixty thousand US dollars from P.A.Sudeikin at 15 per cent of interest in a month from the given sum. After getting her IOU they disappeared.

Victoria Glebovna spent the next ten minutes signing the necessary paperwork according to which she became the owner of a container with American ice cream. After getting the contract and the invoices and she gave the money to Igor.

“You’re a wonderful person, Victoria Glebovna,” Igor announced solemnly. “I do not doubt that our partnership will be long and fruitful. Tomorrow morning you can start selling. I’d recommend you to sell the whole container to one buyer to spare yourself headache.

Putting the money into his briefcase Igor smiled, promised to call tomorrow and left. That was the last time she saw him. But it was only the beginning of a game planned by Mr Shelmov.

Next day Victoria Glebovna hurried to Badayev warehouses. She was quite disappointed to learn they had no container corresponding to the invoice. Sill

hopeful, she went to the office of the supplier, but after a talk with a representative of the management all her hopes vanished like smoke. The firm had no employee named Igor.

Time went quickly, and her debt kept growing. In three months it reached a solid sum of eighty-seven thousand dollars. Then, three days ago, someone rang at the door of Victoria Glebovna's office. It was 8 PM and there was no one in the office except her. Igor entered the room together with two young men in sweatsuits. After freezing in shock for a moment Victoria Glebovna, ashtray in her hands, attacked Igor like a wounded panther. She threw the ashtray, aiming for his head, but only grazed him a bit. When she saw that she had missed, she tried to strangle him, cursing like a soldier all the time. The men in sweatsuits barely managed to drag the furious woman off Igor and sit her down in an armchair.

Igor worked smoothly, without pressing too hard. He adored this type of women. He made a cup of coffee for the object of his blackmail, lit a cigarette and then, after seeing that she calmed down a little, started his game. He quietly put a sheaf of photos on the table. They portrayed Victoria Glebovna and Jose during his last visit. Their intimacy was shown quite well. Then he turned the tape recorder on and Victoria Glebovna heard her own cooing voice. She was clearly at her top form, and for a moment she was fascinated by the roulades of her own voice. "What an actress died in me and nobody can appreciate that," she thought. As if reading her thoughts, Igor said: "You're a great actress, Victoria Glebovna, an invaluable talent. You could've earned lots of money in our team." Startled, she remembered that a little sympathy goes a long way.

"What do you want — money? You will have it in a few days."

"Oh, Victoria Glebovna, that would have been too simple. As you see, the situation has changed, and not in your favour. What you have seen and heard costs much more."

"So how much do I owe you?"

“Oh, just a small thing,” Igor said suavely. “Give your husband this toilet case as a present, but do it today; and in two days you will get the film and the tape and we’ll forgive you the interest. But do bring sixty thousand. That’ll be for my pocket money; and we will part as friends. Deal?”

“I have already parted with you once, Igor, and it cost me a lot.”

“You know what they say, my dear, let bygones be bygones.”

At the same time Victoria Glebovna was thinking furiously about what to do next. She should have told Korney everything at once. He’d have slapped her a couple of times but that wouldn’t have hurt too much. And now it was too late. Korney won’t forgive such discredit to him. He’d kill her. She’d have to take the ‘present’. Still, she had an idea. She nodded to show her agreement.

“Very good,” Igor said tenderly, giving her the expensive leather case. “And do not think of playing KGB games with us; you wouldn’t like the consequences.”

“I hope you didn’t put explosives in there.”

“Why don’t you check?” Igor offered in a friendly tone.

Victoria Glebovna checked the contents with care and attention. She did not find anything suspicious, but she was still sure that there was some catch.

She did as Igor told her, displaying the fashionable case made of shiny leather on a prominent place in their bedroom and writing a short note to Korney: “I know you’re leaving on a business trip today. Take the case with you; let it warm your heart.” Two interminable days passed.

Victoria Glebovna parked her car and, before leaving the salon, once more thought the situation through. She was in a trap with no way out. This evening she’d have to get back the film, to return the money, to get rid of Igor and to fix her relationship with Korney. She’d have to cut through the Gordian knot of life. And what if Jose hadn’t brought the money? Oh well, then she’d have lost, and she’d have to pay for it.

She left the car and hurried along, her heels clicking on the pavement. Approaching the entrance to the house where she rented a one-room flat for

Jose, Victoria Glebovna noticed a young man in a grey coat and a cap. Now where could she have seen that unremarkable face? Chasing the unpleasant thoughts away, Victoria Glebovna entered the house, feeling ready for everything.

The impatient Spaniard met her at the door with passionate kisses and started to undress her right there, ready for love. She put up a tender resistance but, naturally passionate, couldn't hold for long. They came to themselves in bed, half-dressed. Victoria Glebovna looked at her watch, groaned and got up quickly.

"Did you bring the money?" she asked in a severe businesslike tone, fastening her bra.

She noticed that Jose looked hurt by her question and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

"Of course I did; Spaniards are proud people who always keep their word. Are you deserting me at such a moment, then?"

"Jose, you know I'm already getting late for the contract signing. This contract will bring us crazy money. I'll buy you a white yacht," Victoria Glebovna said enthusiastically, stuffing the money into her bag. "Your father would be happy to have such a daughter-in-law."

"We didn't even drink at least a glass of wine," Jose went on whining. "And Father is already happy to know you."

"Darling, tomorrow we'll catch up and drink for the success of our deal," Victoria Glebovna said, looking around before leaving. "Wish me luck. And do not leave the flat; Petersburg is a dangerous city."

Then she was off, the sound of her heels slowly dying down in the corridor. On Kamennostrovsky prospect Victoria Glebovna saw in her rear view mirror a grey car that seemed to follow her. However, once on the Vyborgsky route she seemed to have lost it.

However, her heightened sense of danger did not lie to her; she was being followed by an experienced outdoor surveillance team which kept changing

cars.

The day was particularly quiet and sunny. Turning into the lower Vyborg route, she slowed her car. Half an hour's drive till Komarovo, the village where she had to meet Igor. Passing through the village she couldn't help looking at the tranquil mirrorlike surface of the gulf. At quarter to six Victoria Glebovna's Mercedes, its tyres rustling a little, drove into the parking space of a small cafe romantically called At a Fireplace. The cafe occupied a small wooden cottage rented by an Azerbaijan family.

Before 1991 this part of the coast, overgrown with centenary pines, was assigned to the Journalists' Union, and for more than quarter of a century this cottage had served as a summer house for the family of a well-known journalist. So many notable people had gathered under the roof of this hospitable place, such splendid personalities had found a restful haven here, forming new connections, starting romances...

The barbecue here was really very good. In the evenings a very diverse crowd gathered under the wooden marquees: people came here for good food, for a view on the gulf, for live music. Musicians from the small band knew how to create a special spirit. Heated by wine, vodka and fiery music for every taste, the customers often stayed till two or three AM.

Before leaving her car Victoria Glebovna opened her bag. The money was in place, and in the other compartment she felt a pear-shaped handle with a four-sided cutting wedge: her husband's favourite awl. "They want to earn sixty grand through me and get some fun, too," Victoria Glebovna said to herself. "All right, let's have fun together." She looked into the mirror, rearranged a lock of reddish hair and smiled at her own thoughts. In the mirror she saw the green eyes of a panther ready to jump. Leaving her car, she walked along the pavement of the road winding through the edge of the gulf coast. Low sand hills were covered by bird cherry shrubs, rowan trees with the coral bunches of their berries shooting out here and there. Over all this the centenary pines lifted their fragrant branches to the sky. The sandy

beach was empty at this time of the year.

Victoria Glebovna knew the area well; she had often stayed with her journalist friend in the summer house now full of quite another kind of people. She walked for about two hundred metres, breathing in the aroma of dead pine needles mixing with the sea's bitter smell. The oblate sun painted feathery clouds with scarlet specks, touching the tops of the pines. Victoria Glebovna crossed the road, and suddenly she was in the dark world of twilight in a spruce forest which stood tall on this side of the road. She approached the square clearance apparently serving as a parking space and looked at her watch. It was 6 PM. She did not have to wait. An old-fashioned light blue Ford turned off the road and softly came to a stop near her. Igor was in the driver's seat.

"Sit down, please, Victoria Glebovna, take the weight off your feet," Igor offered almost tenderly. "You're a perfect partner."

"Punctuality is the soul of business," Victoria Glebovna answered, seating herself inside the car. That made her suit skirt ride up, showing her rounded thighs and the openwork edge of her stockings. Igor threw a look out of the corner of his eye, appreciating her charms. "I did everything you told me to do."

"If you hadn't given the present, our meeting wouldn't have happened in such circumstances," Igor said slowly. "You are a clever and shrewd woman, but emotions are your weakness. Learn to control yourself. You are only just starting your business."

"I hope you didn't forget the film, tape and IOU?"

"You are too harsh, Victoria Glebovna," Igor said peaceably, giving her an envelope with tape and film. "I would like to be your partner and protector."

While giving her the envelope, he touched almost casually the woman's naked thigh. The desire awoke in him, making him a dangerous beast.

"Do you have the money with you?"

"Here's all of it," Victoria Glebovna answered with a tremble, giving him the

money.

She was covered by a wave of sexual aggression coming from Igor. He slipped his hand over her naked thigh, over her breasts and then grabbed her by the throat.

“No, not like this,” Victoria Glebovna whispered, trembling. “Kiss me.”

It was as if the Ford was made for such a moment. In a second Igor threw the seat back and started tearing clothes off Victoria Glebovna. He was kissing her face, her neck and her lips passionately when she moved a little apart and whispered hotly:

“Wait a bit, darling, we’d better get safe. I’ll get it in a minute; I have something in my bag.”

Igor, too excited by fiery kisses, did not answer. She found the awl’s handle in her bag and with all her fury thrust it under Igor’s left shoulder blade. As a heated needle pierces butter, the old four-sided awl forged by Korney’s father pierced the young man’s body. The beast growled, wounded to death. Igor started thrashing, crushing Victoria Glebovna down, and then froze. A heavy dark drop fell on her face. Igor was dead.

Now she had to leave this place as fast as possible. Victoria Glebovna managed to get out from under the dead body and looked around. After carefully wiping the blood from her face with a handkerchief she checked the IOU, films and tapes in her bag and took the money from the pocket of Igor’s jacket. “I think I’ll spend that Spanish money on myself, you bastard. Thank you for a lesson, Igor, I’ll never forget it,” Victoria Glebovna thought, opening the car door. She quickly crossed the road, followed the path to the top of the hill, and took a full breath of the sea air, making herself calm down.

Getting down into the valley between the hills she took out the film, opened the tape, crumpled the IOU and clicked on her lighter, then mixed the charred remains with the sand. At that moment, however, she felt as if a lightning-bolt struck her. The awl! She ran back to the meeting place, realizing she had left a serious trace. When she saw the car her heart started beating faster; her

head throbbed. Victoria Glebovna opened the door, her hands trembling. Igor's half-naked body still lay on its side. She climbed into the salon, turned the body face down and froze. There was no awl in the wound.

Fifteen minutes afterwards, Victoria Glebovna settled comfortably at a table which stood right on the sand of the beach, greedily breathing in slightly bitter fresh air. The waitress who knew her as a regular visitor of the At the Fireplace cafe and a generous tipper instantly brought her a misted jug of vodka and a salad with greens and Caucasian cheese. Victoria Glebovna drank a glass of vodka and lighted up happily. "No time to spare between the first and the second," she whispered Korney's favourite army saying and drank one more glass without any snacks. "All right, let us check today's results," Victoria Glebovna thought. "The money is back, the blackmail material is destroyed, but where is the awl?" She did not manage to finish that thought; the vodka worked, carrying pleasant warmth through all her body. Victoria Glebovna moved to take the jug and to pour herself a third glass when she heard her husband's voice:

"Vika, what are you doing here?"

"Too many impressions in one day," she thought. "Korney will certainly kill me; hopefully at once and not before everyone."

"Oh, Korney!" Victoria Glebovna gave him a fake smile. "I've a business meeting here just for us girls. Margot will be coming at seven," she lied quickly.

Victoria Glebovna's only friend, a graduate of the Mukhina school, was a fashion designer. As Victoria Glebovna usually said, rolling her eyes, "Margot is such a heaven-sent friend for me". She made ultra-fashionable clothes for Victoria Glebovna and also practiced psychoanalysis with her, repairing, as she usually said, her friend's psyche, which was traumatized by life.

"So, you're sitting here drinking vodka?" Korney Ivanovich said slowly. "Nice."

"I just decided to relax a little," Victoria Glebovna said nervously, "the day was very nerve-wracking. Have a drink with me."

“That’s for certain,” Korney Ivanovich said, sitting down.

He poured himself half a glass of vodka, drank it all at one gulp, grunted and followed with a bit of lavash and a twig of parsley.

“Well, tell me how you came to this kind of life,” Korney Ivanovich said, flashing his eyes.

“Well, Korney, things go more or less well. Of course there are problems, like in every business, but they do not really matter.”

“Oh, but they do,” Korney Ivanovich growled, putting the awl she forgot in a hurry onto the table.

“I will explain everything, Korney,” Victoria Glebovna babbled.

“Yes, better explain to me than to the crime investigators. I think we’d better leave this place.”

“Korney, let us stay for a while. It’s so nice here.”

Victoria Glebovna started a cigarette. She was trembling.

“Tell me, why did you leave so many traces after killing that man?”

“He blackmailed me and tried to rape me,” Victoria Glebovna babbled.

“And why did you have the awl with you?”

“A safety measure. After all, I was going to meet a businessman and I thought he was behaving suspiciously. And after that I forgot the awl in a hurry. Sorry about that.”

At that moment Korney Ivanovich was noticed from the dance floor by the famous trumpeter and band leader, whiskered Sasha. To greet him Sasha lifted his stylish wide-brimmed white felt hat and spoke into his mike, addressing the guests with his stage voice:

“I heartily greet our dear guest and protector Korney Ivanovich Chernyaev and his wife and especially for them present an old favourite, the Cumparsita tango.”

“Let’s go dance now, Korney,” Victoria Glebovna implored.

No choice now; they were noticed. Korney Ivanovich gallantly offered his arm to his wife and led her to the centre of the well-lit dance floor. Korney

Ivanovich was a wonderful dancer, and Victoria Glebovna wasn't so much dancing as enjoying her effect on the onlookers. As she used to say, she came into this world to startle. Korney Ivanovich moved through the dance floor easily, holding his wife by the waist, doing difficult dance steps. From the corner of his eye he saw his men settled at the tables that allowed the best view; they already ordered barbecue. "I'll be such a bastard if I lead the guys away from here. They're hungry after following Vika all day," Korney Ivanovich thought. "Half an hour more and then we're leaving. I'll call the little bitch's bluff."

He was thirsty after an energetic dance and a difficult day, so he ordered a big jug of Honecker light beer and three hundred grams of vodka. A smiling pale-faced waitress quickly brought his order. Korney Ivanovich delightedly drowned half the jug with one swallow and ordered shashlyk for the vodka. No sense leaving this fun place hungry.

"Tell me, darling, how should I interpret your present?" Korney Ivanovich asked, pouring vodka for his wife.

"Korney, I made a mistake. That bastard backed me into a corner."

"Vika, you let us down. Both me and Felix."

"Enough, Korney. You're getting boring. I told you this won't happen again," Victoria Glebovna said furiously.

She saw that the entire band was watching them and, without any pause, sent a shining white-toothed smile to the men. The familiar voice of the band leader announced: "We dedicate the song 'Vernissage' to the unforgettable and most beautiful woman in Saint Petersburg, Victoria Glebovna Chernyaeva". Victoria Glebovna's eyes flashed like the lights of a New Year tree. It was difficult to stop her now.

"Let's go dance, Korney, this is my favourite song," Victoria Glebovna insistently took her husband by the hand.

They danced without stopping till the musicians took a break, tired by Victoria Glebovna's endless requests to repeat this or that melody. Of course

Chernyaev paid for the songs they ordered; well, he paid for everything.

They left long after midnight. Chernyaev drove Victoria Glebovna's car. He sent off the outdoor surveillance men long ago. They drove towards Saint Petersburg; the headlights shone upon the weird shapes of shrubs and trees. Somewhere near the roadside there were small green lamps. Victoria Glebovna felt wonderful. "Safe now, it looks like," she thought with a yawn. She was wrong.

"Tell me, Vika, who were you meeting in the afternoon?" Chernyaev asked with a cold smile.

Only Victoria Glebovna knew the meaning of this smile.

"Oh, in the afternoon..."

"Yes, Vika, in the afternoon," Korney Ivanovich repeated tensely.

"I had a business meeting with a Spaniard who is my business partner."

"For two hours?"

"Korney, he's my investor, he has the right to ask for a detailed report."

"Don't try to throw me off!"

"Korney, are you jealous?" Victoria Glebovna exclaimed, surprised, looking at her husband with a small child's innocent look.

"I won't let you cheat on me before my own eyes," Korney Ivanovich growled, braking hard. Victoria Glebovna almost hit the windscreen.

"You're crazy, Korney!" she shrieked.

Korney Ivanovich grabbed her throat with his strong hand. He used his free hand to push the seat away and to tear Victoria's bra off, freeing her voluptuous breasts.

"You'll get yours for cuckolding me, bitch!" he yelled furiously, slapping his wife's supple cheeks.

"I didn't do anything, I swear on my child's life!"

"Shut up, damn you, or I'll kill you!" Korney Ivanovich kept growling, tearing her underwear.

Of course Victoria Glebovna never admitted to anything. As she usually said

to her friend Margot, "You know, I am almost a saint towards Korney, I have no grounds to reproach myself, I swear," adding after a pause, "but I'll advise you, Margot, never admit to anything, and maybe you will stay alive then." The two friends were very much alike in many things.

Back home in her bed, with her head on her husband's shoulder, Victoria Glebovna slowly fell asleep, thinking with a smile: "Three rape attempts in one day, and I wouldn't mind repeating two of them. Now that was quite a day. My Korney is a real man, not like those nincompoop adventurers. He's reliable, that's what matters". Her cheeks still smarted from his slaps but she was happy, calm and satisfied. "Only a man like Korney could do it".

In the bottom of the headboard drawer there was a package with a bunch of hundred-dollar bills. Victoria Glebovna set a meeting for tomorrow to discuss a new "sweet" idea. Life went on.