

## After Yekaterina

### Chapter 1

*My parents named me Yekaterina after Our Lady. Yekaterina is my secret name, the one I wear on my heart. To everyone else I am Kadija, after the Prophet's first wife, in case the invaders find us again.*

*My village has no name. It sits at the base of the Tian Shan mountains like a tick on the neck of a mangy dog. It has always existed, according to the elders, though its population has waxed and waned.*

*In the night, in the snug warmth of the hide yurt my father's father built outside the village's mud walls, my parents whisper tales of a different day. The days when Our Lady Yekaterina reigned like a goddess in her golden palace, until the heathen Saracen raged through our country. Of how, out of the ashes of Muscovy she rose again and escaped to lead us through pestilence and famine on a march so horrible most of us died in the winters. It was her strength that flowed into our veins, her will that kept us alive and she loved us as if we were her children—until her strength ran out.*

*It was at her death, when all hope died and the warring captains fought for her simple robe and scepter, that my grandparents fled, for the pestilence had returned and our numbers dwindled further. My grandparents and their friends came here, to the country of Fergana, the promised land.*

The tattered history textbook page caught in the wind as Detektiv Alexander Kazakov stood at the edge of the crime scene. The walls of mountains to the south and east were white today, pouring cold air into the wide Fergana Valley, and he pulled the karakul fur collar of his coat tighter around his neck. At four o'clock the October light was faded. Winter was coming. The aspen and walnut trees had dropped their gilded leaves almost overnight and the golden geese formed 'V' phalanxes overhead as if heavy bombers ranged south.

Again.

Except the geese were nigh-on silent, just the distant haunting honking as they dared the mountain passes that kept the Chinese if not at bay, at least at a distance. The war between the Ottomans to the west and the Chinese to the east had been going on so long, it was almost impossible to imagine a time without war, though the feints and attacks overhead had waned these past few years. History said that the Germans had eaten into the remains of what had once been Holy Russia until they met their allies, the Ottomans. The Anglos and Germans had joined

together to overcome the small French general. But Russia was no more—as the old text book bore testament to. And the tiny democracy that was Fergana had grown out of Russia's remains prepared to hold back invaders, but the invaders didn't come.

Not yet, not yet, blew the wind.

The original Yekaterina's aspirations led to her downfall.

"And what did you aspire to that lost you your life, little one?" he said, studying the photo identification in his hand. The only answer was the rush of traffic from Suvarov Way just beyond the line of trees that blocked the broad boulevards of new Fergana.

He ducked under the police tape and trod the desiccated grass of Potemkin Park, named after the man who had been the original Yekaterina's strength until the Ottomans slew him. The park lay on the eastern edge of the city center amongst three-story walk-ups that were slowly being eaten up as New Moscow's business core grew. In warmer weather the place would be filled with young couples and with mothers besieged by flocks of children. Now it was almost empty, which accounted for the body only being spotted late this afternoon by an officer on patrol.

The girl lay naked, face up under the cold October sun with the white-clad M.E. crouched beside her. The blue sky tinged the pallor of her skin. Her eyes were milky white as if she'd been here for some time. A skein of pale hair fanned around her head and twisted around her neck. Her pale pink mouth was half open to the air as if she would drink it in. A northern girl, in police parlance, a true Russian. Not the dark-haired beauties of the area's original Kyrgyz and Uzbek tribes.

He glanced down at her ID locked in a plastic bag. Kazakov had found it in a bundle of carefully folded clothing—slim, gray skirt and a pink fluffy sweater—just inside the police tape along with the history book and a school diary schedule. No one had touched it except for him. Yekaterina Weber. German sounding name. Strange, or perhaps not given the Anglo-German Empire's arrogant citizens apparently had a God-given right to travel wherever they wanted these days. She was sixteen years old.

"What have we got?" He knelt beside the M.E., Dr. Khalil Khan.

A small brown man with a thick thatch of dark hair and black, slightly slitted eyes, Khan was a Muslim anomaly—a direct descendant of Fergana's historic people in the usually orthodox Christian government machine. He glanced up at Kazakov, then down at the I.D. The victim was lucky to have the little dark man attending. Where most government M.E.s didn't give a damn about their jobs, Khalil Khan was skilled—and he cared.

"That her?" Dr. Khan asked.

“Yekaterina Weber, yes,” Kazakov said.

Khan rolled the body over on its side so Kazakov could see the deep lash marks and a puncture wound on her back. He let her slump back down on the grass and her face turned to Kazakov as if to ask him a question.

*How long are you going to leave me here? How long before Our Lady Yekaterina rises again? How long before the legends come true?*

This was Russia, or what remained of it. Even two hundred plus years since Yekaterina made the mistake of trying to take the Black Sea’s Crimean peninsula from the Ottomans, couldn’t erase all that history and yearnings of a people. But then this was a people descended mostly from soldiers, servants and serfs. Not intelligentsia. Tales of the old hag Baba Yaga, the foolish priest and glass slippers were still told and perhaps even believed. He’d been raised on such magical fictions. In them Baba Yaga was both the witch who ate children and their savior. A lot like the true Yekaterina. With such creatures, how and whom did one trust?

Dearest Yekaterina, he thought as he studied the girl: It could take a long time, if it happens at all.

“The lashes look like they were perimortem. Whip most likely. Done with anger? The puncture wound probably killed her. It was most likely a knife-like instrument. She may not have died here.”

Kazakov nodded. “Not enough blood on the ground. Even though the ground’s not frozen, there should be some sign of a pool. So, the killing was emotionally motivated. When the whipping wasn’t enough our murderer killed her.”

Dr. Khan nodded. “You’re learning.” He lifted her arm. “By the lack of rigor I’d say that she’d been here a few hours at most, but it’s harder to judge with the cold. It could be as long as twelve hours. You can see the process has started in the tightness of the eyelids and the jut of the jaw.” He nodded down at the girl. “Funny how a smile makes all the difference.” The girl in the government school ID was dressed in a pink fluffy sweater and her hair was swept back behind her ears. A broad white smile was aimed at the camera.

Khan was right. The smile made her look like a school girl, ready for her future.

But in the grass, she was just another Yekaterina: past czarina, long dead diarist, they were all just dead on this chill October morning.

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In the cold concrete office of the New Moscow *politseyshiyuchastok*, the police station, Kazakov sat with the girl’s school book and identification open before him. The drafty room housed ten detectives, the small city’s entire squad, dealing with all forms of crime from drugs to

murder in the city center and old city. Other squads, housed elsewhere, dealt with crime in the suburbs and still another specialty unit dealt with corporate crime. Seven of the room's nine other cold metal desks were unoccupied at the moment. Apparently, most cases had been solved by six o'clock today.

The two other desks were occupied by Antonov and Alenin, the A and A team—partners who had worked together the past ten years. Antonov was a granite block of a man with sullen blue eyes and scowling, downturned lips that could turn themselves upright at the blackest of humor. But a frown and a black sense of humor weren't something to be held against him—Kazakov shared them—as did most detectives in New Moscow. Antonov was a fine investigator who had graduated from training a year before Kazakov—and never failed to remind Kazakov of it.

His partner, Alenin, was five years Kazakov's junior and the antithesis of Antonov's body type—tall, with an athlete's broad shoulders and lean muscle slowly gathering the weight of middle age. He had pale blue eyes and a ready smile that offset the dourness of his partner.

Kazakov sighed and inhaled the stink of cold tea and the cheap unfiltered Ottoman cigarettes preferred by the squad and most of the country. He had quit smoking himself, or so he told himself, though he still kept a single cigarette in his wallet against emergencies.

"That was a deep sigh, friend," Alenin said looking up from where he was reading a document over Antonov's shoulder. "Have you finally found a girl who will have you?" He grinned.

It was the same teasing refrain that had hounded Kazakov since he and his wife split up and he hadn't immediately taken another woman.

"I suppose you could say that," Kazakov played along. "Except this one is sixteen years old and dead of stab wounds." He met Alenin's gaze. "Who else will have her?"

"Maudlin bastard," Antonov muttered. "Let him have her, Sergei. We have other fish to fry." The big man gave a small nod to Kazakov. They had worked a few cases together long ago. There was still respect between them, though their outlook on many things had diverged.

Kazakov turned back to his evidence. He sipped his cold, sweet tea as he considered. The school book was one he remembered from his own childhood, a treasured diary of one of the first generations of Russian refugees to make the lush fields of the Fergana Valley their home.

The flood of migrants had come at a price. The traditional Kyrgyz and Uzbek villagers and their animistic beliefs had at first been welcoming, but then had been pushed out by the sheer numbers of displaced people who had come east. Those villagers had taken to the higher mountains, while a Muslim minority had stayed as the desperate Russians settled around them.

The Russians had been starving and dying from the plague that descended on them after the Ottoman war destroyed all infrastructure and food sources. It was on that desperate diaspora following the Tea Road across the continent that blessed Yekaterina gave the decimated remains of her people the gift of democracy for their petty states. For a few of them, like those in Fergana, the gift had held. Yekaterina had always held that Russians were different from all others.

But why was the girl carrying this particular book? It was a two-hundred-year-old book, read to elementary school children and Yekaterina Weber was certainly older than twelve.

And what was she doing in Potemkin Park? Less than twelve hours dead at most, Khan had said. That would mean that she'd been out before five in the morning. An unusual time for a girl that age. Most teenagers preferred to be up in late morning. And why left there and naked? It was as if the killer was making some point. He would have to wait on Khan's report to know if it was a sex crime, but the lack of clothing suggested it.

First things first. He needed to contact the family, not a job he enjoyed when the news wasn't good. Shoving himself up from his desk he lumbered over to the small desk in the corner, and slumped into the seat. The massive machine was the latest investigative tool provided to their office, courtesy of the city council.

It was a huge, gray, steel-covered block imported from the Germans, almost as tall as a man, with ugly metal on three sides and what looked like a twenty-inch television screen on the front with a keyboard in a small depression beneath the screen.

Bending to look at the keyboard, he typed in Yekaterina Weber, hit the red *send* button and leaned back in the chair. It groaned under his bulk for though he had always kept fit through his outdoor activities, he had grown lazy in his exercise these past five years since his fortieth birthday. Not for the first time today, he had the urge to smoke.

Ping.

The machine had things to tell him like a fairy tale fish or birds that held the secret truth. He hit the blue receive button. A list of names appeared with the top name in bold, the most likely match for the requested name. The length of the list surprised him. It seemed there were more German Webers residing in Fergana than he'd realized. For a moment, like a shiver at a memory, the realization made him uncomfortable.

Some said the feeling came when someone walked over your grave.

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The home address listed on the government database had been pulled from government school records and existed beyond the large eight-story towers of the business heart of Fergana

and beyond the brightly-painted domed concrete replica of Saint Basil's Cathedral in the middle of New Moscow. Beyond the walk-up apartments encircling Potemkin Park, a new area had been planted with young trees at the curb. When the trees were grown this area would be a paradise compared to the flat, grassland steppes of the countryside.

Neat rows of steep-roofed houses with faux-wood concrete sides were physical echoes of the dacha homes the Russian people had left behind long ago—or at least what they believed them to be. Neat, pocket-sized yards held small vegetable gardens that were now faded and tattered brown with the fall. Here and there a last wizened tomato blushed forgotten and withered in the cool.

The Weber yard was surrounded by a hip-high concrete block fence like a half-hearted fortress in the midst of the neighborhood. The yard itself was mostly fallow though a few turnips and winter kale grew at the ends of regimented raised beds that looked newly turned. A small stool sat next to the door with a trowel and a set of gardening gloves, the gloves neatly pulled inside of each other. Everything in its place.

The porch was swept, the door newly painted, so slick and shiny red he wondered it didn't come off on his knuckles at his knock. The sounds of footfall echoed within and then the curtain stirred on the window beside the door. There was a moment of hesitation and then the door opened. A woman stood there, slim, with Yekaterina's silken blond hair darkened slightly by the years. It was twisted back from her face into a precise figure eight. She was tall for a woman, almost five-foot-nine in her low boxy heels with the buckles over the instep. She wore a slim-fitting tweed skirt and a brown cardigan—buttoned—over a crisp white blouse buttoned up to her throat.

"Yes?" Her eyes were guarded and she held the door as if she planned to slam it shut at the first sign of danger. As if she did not trust strangers.

"Detektiv Kazakov of the Fergana Politseyshiy." He showed her his identification. "You are Mrs. Weber?"

"Not Weber anymore. It is Bure. My first husband passed away and I remarried." She nodded, but her hand came up to her collar. "Is something wrong? My husband..."

Bure. The name meant something...

"May I come in?" There was something wrong with her response. The cold air of the afternoon swirled around his shoulders. She must feel it, but she seemed frozen where she stood. And no mention of her daughter. Odd.

Finally, she nodded and stepped aside. He ducked his head to enter and found himself inside—history. Wooden floors and walls gleamed as if someone regularly waxed them. The

familiar scents of beetroot, tea and a slight hint of something sweet and spicy. To one side of the door a small parlor was dominated by a heavy ornate couch with embroidered cushions and a high, wingback chair covered in crimson damask. A fireplace mantle was filled with old family photos in silver frames that showed Mrs. Bure and a tall pale man who looked vaguely familiar. Others showed a younger Yekaterina in a frothy white dress that was typical of religious ceremonies, and a much younger version of the blonde man with an older version of himself, and an elegant blonde-haired woman who looked strangely similar to Mrs. Bure. His father and mother, maybe.

An antique crucifix hung in a corner, and in a niche in the wall hung what looked like a gold-gilt icon of the Virgin. It looked old. It looked genuine. It looked like something you would see in the treasury section of the Fergana Museum. For all the middle class outer trappings of their house, this family clearly had come from old wealth. And had brought it with them. Not a soldier, servant or serf.

He turned to Mrs. Bure and nodded at the icon. "A lovely piece. It is old, correct?"

She gave a single nod. "It was in my husband's family—all they brought out of old Russia."

He didn't quite believe her, but nodded. "Perhaps you should have a seat. This visit, it is about your daughter."

"Yekaterina?" She perched on the edge of the overwhelming couch and, if anything, her pale skin went almost the color of her dead daughter's flesh. "You've found her, then."

"Found her?"

"My husband reported her missing two days ago."

And that was impossible because when he entered the girl in the computer a flag for a missing person's case would have shown against her name.

"Do you know who he spoke to?" Kazakov asked. It was not unheard of that an officer was slow in entering information in the police information system...

She shook her head and the couch seemed to consume her. "What is this about? What has happened? Is Yekaterina all right?"

Finally, she asked the right question. Stranger and stranger. Why did her concern leap so quickly to her husband when she had a missing daughter? He took a deep breath and took the liberty of sitting down in the chair. "Mrs. Bure, when was the last time you saw your daughter?"

Her gaze fell to her hands. "It was Friday at supper. We were at the table and my husband scolded her. She was acting silly—almost giddy. My husband told her to mind her table

manners or she could go to her room.” Mrs. Bure bit her lip almost as if she knew what was coming. “She chose her room,” she whispered.

These were the times he hated his job. The disaster. The pain that would overwhelm a lovedone’s eyes. But there was no use in delaying. It had to be done. “Mrs. Bure. I regret to inform you, but we found your daughter’s body this morning in Potemkin Park. She had been stabbed. Yekaterina is dead.”

“No.” She shook her head. “That cannot be.”

He reached across a small coffee table and caught her hand. “I am sorry, but it was her. She had her identification.”

She went statue still, her face rigid. Then she yanked her hand away and stood. “No. No. Not Yekaterina. No.” She paced the floor between the mantel and the door then stopped abruptly, still dry-eyed. “I must call my husband.”

Kazakov stood. “A good idea. While you do, may I examine your daughter’s room?”

She met his gaze, her lip quivering almost as if she was angry. “At the top of the stairs. The second door on the right.” Then she left him for the back of the house that must be the kitchen.

Kazakov clumped up the stairs, considering. Most mothers would be in tears. Most mothers would be with him right now, sobbing about how their daughter was a good girl, demanding to know how and where and why this had happened and who would do something like this to their child. At the top of the stairs he paused to listen. Silence ticked around him in the darkened hallway, but from downstairs came the sound of harsh whispers. They rose and fell in the staccato of anger. Not grief, but fury.

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The second room on the right had a closed door, but daylight placed long panels of light on the hall floor through the others. The first room on his left was clearly the parents’. Kazakov ducked his head inside. A double bed with quilted cover in a patchwork of shades of red. A curtained window. Built-in drawers along one wall. A wood heater against the winter cold and another orthodox icon hung on the wall. This one did not have the gold gilt of the one downstairs, but the lustrous paint said it was still old. Neat. Tidy. Well cared for.

He went down the hall to Yekaterina’s room and opened the door.

The spice he’d detected at the front door caught him full in the face and he shook himself at the heady scent. It was like catching a face full of church brazier incense. Was the girl very religious? The body hadn’t worn a crucifix, but there had been that photo in the white dress.



He stepped inside. A girl's room. Magazine pages of the latest shaggy-headed boy-band from Anglia taped to the wall. A narrow bed with a blue bedspread under the window. A desk. A straight-backed spindle chair. A small bookcase filled with books.

Closing the door behind him, he stood there hoping to get a feel for his victim, but from the look of things Yekaterina Weber was a typical schoolgirl. He opened the drawers of her desk but found only paper and pens—odd in itself. Didn't girls usually stuff odd sundry things into such places? There was nothing that told of Yekaterina or her friendships here.

The closet gave no more clues: a few straight cut skirts like her mother wore. Blouses. A sweater of navy blue. No pink fluffy sweater. Nothing like that at all. As if the pink sweater next to her body was special? Perhaps something she purchased herself because it made her feel pretty, while these clothes bore the straight-laced, utilitarian stamp of being purchased by her mother?

The bookcase held novels and school books. There was a slim empty space that he would bet his paycheck had once held the slim diary of Yekaterina of the yurts. He checked each of the remaining books, but found nothing. Where were her school notebooks? The binders teenagers used? She was in school. There had to be something of that kind.

He checked under the bed, but there was nothing there, not even dust. When he stepped out of the room, her mother was waiting.

“My husband will be home in a few minutes. He would like you to wait for him.”

He nodded. “She has a very neat room. Unusual in a teenager.”

Her chin lifted a little. “I expect my child to have high standards.”

“I see.” He nodded. “Does she keep a briefcase or a school backpack? I noticed that there are no school notebooks in the room.”

Mrs. Bure went still. “She had one. It was a blue courier bag—the latest fashion. We got it for her last Christmas.”

“And it is not in the house?” he asked.

“If it is not in her room, then it is not here.” Her closed expression did not leave room for more questions.

His footsteps sounded hollow as he went down the stairs after her and soon a black Ziln limousine pulled up at the curb. Kazakov stiffened by the parlor window as a man climbed out of the front and held the door for a passenger. Bure. Kazakov remembered, now. Bure was a government functionary who was now being groomed for something greater. The newly formed Reformation Party had great things planned for him. Great enough to command a car and driver to bring him home.

Boris Bure was a man of middle height who seemed to command the hallway as soon as he entered. Perhaps it was his breadth of shoulder. Perhaps it was the rigid way he held his ramrod-straight back and white-haired head. Perhaps it was the metallic scent that came with him when he entered the room, as if he generated an electric charge. He had pale blue eyes and large white teeth that he exposed almost as a warning as he shook Kazakov's hand. Even though Bure was a good six inches shorter than Kazakov's six-foot-two, Bure seemed to look him eye-to-eye.

"What's this all about then? I reported Yekaterina missing two days ago and haven't spoken to a detective since and now you arrive telling my wife her daughter is dead."

Her daughter. Not his.

Kazakov bowed his head. "I am sorry to bring this bad news. Yekaterina's body was found in Potemkin Park this afternoon. She was murdered."

Her mother's hand came to her mouth as if she finally believed. Bure did nothing as if letting the news settle in. Then he nodded.

"Terrible news. Terrible." He caught his wife in a hug. "I know how this must upset you, love." He patted her back as if she might break, but if Kazakov was waiting for emotion in Bure's voice, it wasn't there.

The man made no move to take them back into the parlor either. It was more as if he expected Kazakov to leave.

"Mr. Bure, your wife tells me that you last had dinner with Yekaterina on Friday. Can you tell me about that?"

Bure shrugged, still holding his wife. "We ate. She was being foolish. I told her she could either act like a proper lady or she could go to her room."

Kazakov nodded and made a note of Bure's statement. "Can you tell me what she was doing that was so foolish?"

Bure and his wife looked at each other.

"It was nothing. She was talking nonsense."

"What, precisely, did she say?"

Bure released his wife to turn to Kazakov. "Detektiv, do I look like a man who would remember foolishness? Now my wife has had an awful shock. I would like to tend to her. Perhaps you could leave us in peace in this time of grief."

Bure eased past Kazakov and opened the door, inviting him to leave. Kazakov had gotten as much as he was going to from this odd couple, but it was stranger still that they did not want more from him. Now he just had to determine what this oddity meant.

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It was the two-thirty the next afternoon on his way to an appointment at Yekaterina's school that his radio crackled and he was called to the second body.

This one was on the far side of New Moscow, in the old Islamic quarter. Square mud and stucco houses leaned together around hidden central courtyards. Once the houses had been the graceful villas of the Muslim caravan merchants, for the Silk and Tea Roads had both wound through Fergana generations ago, but now each house held four or five impoverished families; it seemed the new Russian economy had no place for Muslim employees. Television antennas and clotheslines filled the flat roof tops. Narrow streets barely wide enough for a single car wound through the maze of buildings, the streets still sometimes blocked by a donkey carrying burlap bags of limes or an enterprising businessman who had spread his goods under awnings into the street.

Children scattered through the streets at the sight of his sedan. In this part of town no police presence was a good thing—in the eyes of the residents. Kazakov came to a stop where the houses ran out and a field of grass ran away toward the mountains.

The roadside was clogged with marked police vehicles and the M.E.'s wagon. Kazakov pulled in behind them near a gathering crowd, but instead of expensive suits like Bure had worn, these men wore dusty trousers and woolen work shirts with their small white, embroidered felt *ak kalpak* perched on their heads. The women wore scarves and one ancient grandmother even wore the bright skirts and white, ornately wound *elechekturban* of the Kyrgyz hill tribes like a ghost out of time.

Once these people and their Uzbek cousins had been the only people in Fergana. Now, after the influx of people and two hundred years of large families amongst the Russians, they were a minority in their own land and becoming more so every year. To the point where some whispered that they sympathized with Fergana's enemies. So far there'd been no trouble, but bad blood festered and there were even rumors of the Krygyz spying in the mountains for the Ottomans against the Chinese.

Kazakov climbed out to the sound of angry murmurs.

Police tape had been set up, roping off an area in the middle of the field. The wind off the eastern Tian Shan Mountains ripped at the tape and its metal poles. It rippled the grass in a sea of violent gold and green and whipped the clothes of the police and the onlookers. Kazakov pulled his karakul collar tighter. It was colder than normal.

Uniformed police officers kept the people at bay. Kazakov waded out into the brittle grass and it rattled and tugged against his pant legs. The earth was hard underfoot and dust rose

with each footfall. At the western edge of the old town rose the five peaks of the great Yekaterina's Mountain turned golden in the setting sun.

The body lay tangled in the tall grass with the backdrop of the snow-covered Tian Shan range. His arm was outstretched as if he reached for them, and his legs were tangled as if he'd been running. He wore dark trousers and a plain white shirt—one that looked as if it had been pressed to impress someone. The red bloom of a gunshot wound burned through the center of his back.

Staying to the edge of the police line, Kazakov circled the scene. The victim was young, with that floppy hair the young men were copying from the foreign musicians. His head was turned to one side and his eyes and mouth were open. Beside him knelt Dr. Khan.

"What do we have?" Kazakov asked as he ducked under the tape and knelt beside the M.E.

"Male. Young. I'd say about eighteen. Single shot to the back. By the look of it I'd say it was a large caliber weapon."

"A fight? A mugging?"

Khan lifted his head from examining a hand. "Nothing under his nails. No bruising of the knuckles. I'd say he was running. By his face, I'd say running for his life. Look at the path he left." He pointed.

It was true. A path of crushed grass led toward the northern edge of the old town. "Any idea who he is?"

"The ID in his wallet says his name's Manas uulu Semetai—Semetai son of Manas."

Semetai Manas, but written in the traditional name structure of the Muslim Kyrgyz. Only the most traditional of the Muslim families held names of that fashion and these were even drawn from the heroes of the great oral epic of the Kyrgyz people. Kazakov nodded, stood, and retraced the victim's path, back toward the old town's weathered, grey strained walls.

The path led right into the maze of streets, as if the victim might have burst from them before being gunned down. Kazakov reached the narrow dirt street and stepped between the buildings. The sunlight disappeared and so did the worst of the wind, though a scuffle of dust blew around his feet.

The dryness meant that footprints were hard to distinguish. Clearly this was a well-used route because the dusty soil showed many scuff marks. There were no doors in the walls of the buildings here: the doors must give out onto the cross street. No window up above either. Windows would look out into the interior courtyards. Inside these buildings were private worlds. Ones that no longer quite meshed with the modern city New Moscow had become. Piles of

garbage had been set against the wall to await the irregular pickup. With a foot, he shoved aside the pile of bags and melon rinds and a bright patch of color showed even in the gloom.

Pulling gloves on, Kazakov dug through the sour-sweet rot of melon and the remains of old mutton bones—well chewed by dogs. A blue courier bag lay in the dust and muck but a sweet spice he recognized cut through the rot. He picked up the bag by its strap and gingerly carried it back the way he'd come. Visiting Yekaterina's school would have to wait.

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In the concrete cavern of his office, Kazakov considered his desk and the Weber case's open cardboard evidence box in the center of the top. It held the girl's clothing including her fluffy pink sweater—probably something the girl kept for special occasions—her identification and the schoolbook. Beside it sat the bag he had found. It fit Yekaterina's mother's description of the girl's notebook bag.

At eight o'clock in the evening the office was empty, though a still-steaming cup of tea on Antonov's desk said that it hadn't been empty long. Crime didn't occur according to schedule.

Beyond the lone window across the room, night had long fallen and the wind flattened a few snowflakes against the glass. He contemplated all the things that needed to be done in this strange case.

Two young people dead, the blue bag a potential connection between them.

Hands encased in thin rubber gloves, he unzipped the bag and rummaged through it. Its contents included a carefully folded white blouse as if the girl had changed into her pink sweater before she died, suggesting that she had some place special that she was going. There were also a small jar of scented cream reminiscent of church incense and school notebooks with the name Yekaterina Weber printed carefully in the center of the inside of each cover. The outside of the covers had the flower and heart doodles and designs of a typical bored student. He could remember doing something similar himself when he was in school, except his doodles had tended more toward airplanes and guns.

Guns like the one that had killed Semetai Manas.

Just what was a school bag belonging to Yekaterina Weber doing in the old town of Fergana? What was it doing so close to a young man's dead body? Multiple murders didn't usually happen within twenty-four hours of each other. Not in New Moscow, though up in the mountains there might be more violence.

He flipped through the pages of the notebooks. Algebra and history: the destruction of an ancient country. The building of Fergana. The tiny new homeland was pressed like a leaf between the Chinese and the Ottomans who, with their sometime allies, the Anglo-German, were intent

on completing their conquest of China. It would fulfil the Ottomans' centuries-old ambition of dominating the world. So far Fergana had stood as a neutral space in the Great Game between the two empires. If the Ottomans were victorious, Fergana wouldn't stand a chance.

But that was tomorrow's problem. For today he needed to figure out who had killed two young people and why.

He had tried to interview the Manas family, but in the closed community of the old town he had wasted three hours before determining that the family had abandoned their last known address. None of their neighbors would talk to him. No one would tell him where they'd gone.

He pulled out Yekaterina's old schoolbook diary found at her murder scene and thumbed through it. Why was it there? Why was her bag at the scene of the boy's murder?

The bag suggested the deaths were connected, but the classroom schedule contained only class assignments. He examined the notes on the day of her death, but there was only mention of a term paper to be researched. In the bottom right corner was a doodle of a heart next to the letter P.

He flipped through the pages again and noted the heart repeated many times, while the letter varied between, P, Y and PT. A code of some kind?

He couldn't say, and turned to the history book. It contained only page after page of the old story of the past diarist Yekaterina's escape with her parents and the founding of the Ferganese homeland. It was almost a fable, a creation myth that let people remember there had been another place, another time when they had been a great and noble people under the great Tzarina Yekaterina who had given them freedom. It gave substance to their dreams and to the fables grandmothers told to their grandchildren.

Of course, a child's schoolbook didn't mention how that same Tzarina had brought destruction upon them all by waking the slumbering Ottoman empire with her armies. Or how she had kept her people enslaved as serfs until the extent of the Ottoman destruction was so great that the whole system supporting her kingdom collapsed and she was forced to take refuge with the common people. That was the uncomfortable truth of their democratic freedom that most people failed to remember.

He went to close the book but something caught his eye. The inside back cover held a simple inscription.

*For Yekaterina, my heart.*

*Love, Semetai.*

There was his connection.

That and a pink sweater that a young, infatuated girl would wear to meet her sweetheart.

A chill ran up his back in the stillness of the room. From beyond the detective office came the sounds of life in the rest of the station. But not here. Here on his desk there was only death and destruction caused by young love.

She'd been giddy, her mother had said. Foolish, in her stepfather's words. All the signs of a schoolgirl crush, an infatuation. It was the kind of thing that a father would tease a daughter about.

But an infatuation between a good Orthodox Catholic Russian girl, stepdaughter of a man on the rise in politics, and a boy named Semetai?

That would be a problem. A problem the family would want to fix.

Both families?

Manas uulu Semetai was a name steeped in tribal traditions and there was no love lost between the tribes and the Russian newcomers—not anymore.

The lashes on the girl's back before she was stabbed. Could that be a scourging by an angry family—angry that she had seduced their boy?

Had the Manas family run because they'd killed the girl? And was that why there was such strangeness in the Bure family? Had they done the same in return?

"I need to understand!" He shoved back from his desk, stood, and then stabbed the desk phone with his finger. It buzzed in his ear and then clicked as someone answered.

"Khan?"

"Yes." The calm voice of the M.E. soothed him over the phone. The M.E. would be nearing the end of his shift this evening.

"I need to talk to you. Do you have time?"

There was silence a moment and Kazakov heard the smile. "No. But you will come anyway. I will be here." He hung up.

As Kazakov pulled his coat on, the office door yanked open and Detektiv Chief Inspektor Rostoff pushed into the room. Once they had been friends. They had gone through police training together, but Rostoff had had a free ride because of his family connections. Those same connections had let him rise quickly in rank. Now his large red nose and bleary eyes tracked across the room and settled on Kazakov.

"The others are out? Good. Busy men. Always busy. I like to see that." Rostoff was a bear of a man, in the old Russian style, with a heavy coat and fur hat in winter. In the fall it was just the coat that reeked of too much sweat leached into old wool. Rostoff pulled his gloves off and strode through the desks to Kazakov.

“Good man.” He scanned the evidence on the desk. “A case. You are busy? Yes?” He pounded Kazakov’s shoulder and then hitched a leg over the corner of a neighboring desk and sat.

Rostoff never showed his face in the detektiv section and certainly not at this hour. He was too busy rubbing shoulders with the big wigs in the justice department. That he was here now was a worry.

Rostoff grinned a big yellow smile. “My dear Kazakov. Look at the hour.”

Kazakov did. Eight-forty pm. He had worked later many times. The question was what or who had brought Rostoff here.

“You are a good man. You work hard, my old friend. Maybe sometimes you work too hard.”

Kazakov went cold as Rostoff pointedly scanned the evidence again, then casually picked up the diary, the school schedule and bag and dropped them in the cardboard evidence box.

“This case, it has you worried, yes? I can tell by the look in your eyes. Would it surprise you that it has others worried, too? Maybe you should not worry so much. Maybe sometimes you should let things go. Yes?” His yellow smile broadened as he settled the box top in place. “You see? Not so difficult.”

Frozen, Kazakov just looked at him. What could he do that would not bring the weight of Rostoff’s sanctions down on him? What could he say? “It’s a double murder. Since when do we let such things go?”

Rostoff said nothing but his thick lips curved in a semblance of a dismissive smile.

Clenching his fists, Kazakov turned his back on the other man and headed for the door.

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Rostoff might have handed down an official decree, but that didn’t mean Kazakov had to listen. It was a double murder. A murder of children. Surely to God, that meant something.

The M.E.’s offices sat in the basement of the Our Lady Yekaterina Hospital. It was a large, four-story building built with a fountain and garden in the front that briefly, in the springtime, could be called beautiful. But summer brought the winds off the mountains that drank the water from the fountain and leached the trees to the color of dust. In October, the fountain was brown with leaves. In November the snow would be falling. Kazakov left his sedan in the street-lit parking lot and strode through the stand of half-barren, night-bound trees under the half-grown moon. They were the tallest in Fergana—maples while in most of the city it was generally aspen that survived the wind and snow of the winter. The red leaves were a particular



treat in a town built mainly of concrete, and he liked the way they shuffled around his feet. Almost like snow, without the cold and the shoveling.

He bypassed the hospital's well-lit main door and went down a shadowed set of concrete stairs to one side of the structure. A metal door was locked, but he knocked and the door buzzed. He pushed inside into the stomach-clenching smells of blood and guts and formaldehyde. The receptionist nodded him through.

If Khalil Khan was busy, he had made time for Kazakov. He sat behind a small, scarred wooden desk in a small office as if he was waiting. He had two files closed before him on the desk and nodded Kazakov into the lone chair across from him. Behind Khan the wall was lined with books.

"Tell me what I don't know," Kazakov asked.

"The boy was killed with an antique rifle. The bullet was of a type only used for some of the old Chinese makes." He looked at his hands and let the news hang in the air. "It's the kind the Kyrgyz use for hunting. They trade for them at the markets on the other side of the mountains—when the Ottomans and Chinese aren't fighting."

"Any likelihood of a Russian getting their hands on such a weapon?" Given Khan was Kyrgyz he would have an insight into such things.

Khan pursed his lips and shrugged. "Maybe. It might be possible—from police evidence lockers perhaps, but otherwise unlikely. They aren't licensed and they're kept hidden. The Kyrgyz take their weapons seriously. These things are almost family heirlooms—reminders of a time before the Russians took over and regulated everything."

He said it carefully, no inflection in his voice. It must be difficult for a descendent of those tribal people to see how their world had become a Russian country.

"So, what you're saying is that Semetai Manas was likely killed by his own people."

Khan didn't say anything, only met his gaze.

"You know something," Kazakov said softly.

Khan shook his head. "Not know. At least not know-as-evidence know. But there are things in this culture, just as in yours. The sense of proper. The sense of place and the need for continuity of a people. You cannot let anything get in the way of that. Of the blood."

A sick feeling settled in the pit of Kazakov's stomach. Such pride and sense of people ran strong in Russians too. It was bred into them. It was fed in schools with books such as Yekaterina's diary and by the state in the names of hospitals and parks and streets and mountains that bore different names depending on who you spoke to.

"The girl. The lashes."

Khan nodded. "They were deep. Made with rage. There were also deep bruises on her neck and shoulders. I'd say she was throttled in anger, then held down for the lashing before she was stabbed. Whoever did it buried the hilt of the knife deep in her. The edges of the wound were deeply torn."

The air was too close, the stench of death too strong as Kazakov heaved himself up out of the chair.

"One more thing," Khan said. "She was pregnant."

Feeling momentarily drunk, Kazakov nodded. "How far along?"

"First trimester." Khan looked away at his desk and shook his head.

"Thank you."

Kazakov left the office feeling old and useless and climbed the stairs to the parking lot.

A gust of mountain wind caught him and he staggered and thought he might be ill. Instead he turned his back on the lights illuminating Yekaterina's mountain and fumbled for the lighter and the lone cigarette he kept in his wallet. Shielding them against the wind he lit the cigarette and inhaled the warm acrid tar only to let it out in a long belch of smoke.

The wind tore it away and the moonlight caught on the Tian Shan Mountains that loomed white but no longer so high. No longer so remote. With a sigh, he stubbed the cigarette out and headed for his car. He would need to be very careful or he could light a fire that would ignite his country. There was already too much division between Fergana's Russians and the people whose country the Russians had occupied.

War had found a new way across the mountains.

