

The Seventh Woman

Published by Carelinks Publishing,

PO Box 152, Menai NSW 2234 AUSTRALIA, March 2012

ISBN 978-1-906951-42-9

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- CHAPTER 1 Marlboro Burning Slowly
 - CHAPTER 2 The *Bomzh*
 - CHAPTER 3 *The Gulag Archipelago*
 - CHAPTER 4 Running for the Door
 - CHAPTER 5 The Hitman
 - CHAPTER 6 *The Brothers Karamazov*
 - CHAPTER 7 The Laima Clock
 - CHAPTER 8 Springsteen and Streisand
 - CHAPTER 9 Event and Meaning
 - CHAPTER 10 The Hard Drive Man
 - CHAPTER 11 Tears In The Breaks
 - CHAPTER 12 Operation Quartz
 - CHAPTER 13 Crossing the Rubicon
 - CHAPTER 14 *The Idiot*
 - CHAPTER 15 *Crime and Punishment*
 - CHAPTER 16 The Sauna on Zirgu Street
 - CHAPTER 17 The Last Gauntlet
-

The Seventh Woman

CHAPTER 1

Marlboro Burning Slowly

Marlboro burning slowly, the night drifting by in Iļģuciems; snow softly falling, flakes of two minds as to whether to settle on the window sill or drift on to the apartments below. Awake, asleep, an endless scheme within Alison's head. England, London, Grove Park, walking the dog in the park, early morning train to London Bridge, change there for Victoria. Just 8 minutes from LB to Vic. Depending on the signals. Her Christadelphian, small time Protestant religious past, baptism in the dimly lit back room at Linden Hall, mum and dad, Alan. Alan. Alan. Now it's Penny, first of all it was Karen. The Bible. The brethren. *The brethren*. "The brethren want to interview you". Wedding day smiles, walking down the aisle photo, there on the mantelpiece in the flat. University, that was "not the thing for a young sister in Christ", let alone studying *Russian*. They're going to invade Israel. The Bible says so, Ezekiel 38. Yeah, Sunday evening lectures. The blow-up in the business meeting about whether to change the time from 7 to 6:30. Mum in tears. Grace. Jim Proctor giving that talk about it. Unforgettable. Changed me for life. Really. Gotta keep at it. But dad... was so angry about that change in time of the lectures, driving home from the meeting, he was so mad he couldn't even talk. Another one? Must really try to quit. Lighter getting empty. One of those cheap ones from the Statoil filling station. Jim. Such a nice guy. Man with the face of Jesus. And they disfellowshipped him. And now, he's struggling with cancer. Should've stuck up for him, when they came for me there was nobody left to stand up for me, how did that Nazi era poem go. Some smart guy. "Upholding the Truth in its purity". And now. I'm not really a lesbian. Ilze, well yeah, she was just a friend. Someone. Who also got divorced. Men. And all that. But grace. Gotta do something with my life. Can't leave Him. He's not left me. No... no. He's not. I don't think so. The next story for the paper. What is there to write about here in the Baltics. Really. Ought to be asleep. Alan. Alan, Alan. Well at least I got a good settlement. Can live here and do my thing. Can live on the interest and still eat out most days. But... Did I pray tonight? The "business meeting". With great sorrow... withdraw our fellowship... for behaviour unbecoming of a sister in Christ. There must be... must be...

Dawn breaks hard in the Baltic Winter. When the weak sun finally emerges triumphant after 9 a.m., it seems but a pyrrhic victory, a victory at too great a loss to the dingy greyness to really be much to glory in. Alison's stop was near the start of the number five tramway, so she usually got to sit down most of the journey in to the office. Amidst the glum-to-suspicious faces and human silence of the early morning tram, about the only glimmer of humanity was the hangover from the Soviet era of giving up your seat to someone older or sicker than yourself. But not too many old or invalid folk ventured out in the rush hour, so Alison settled herself defensively on the seat as she usually did. Tucked up her coat beneath her, white earphones sticking out against her blond hair, Roger Waters singing a bit louder than she realized, to the evident suspicion and furtive stares of the neighbouring passengers. Satchel now on her lap, she pulled out a battered pocket Bible and an even more battered hardback reading planner, the once gold letters of *The Bible Companion* long faded. Today... Genesis

24. Until Uzvaras Boulevard. She glanced up at the war memorial, to check the flame of socialism was still being kept burning by the Russian faithful. Alison liked to imagine that the older woman in front of her was wiping a tear from her eye as the conductor called out the name of the stop. ‘Victory Boulevard’ was to celebrate Latvia’s independence from the USSR, her supposed victory, and they went and called the tram stop right next to the Russian war memorial just that... yes, they do provoke them. But maybe that older woman in front was just yawning and rubbing sleep out of her eyes. After Grēcinieku Iela, time for a change. Funny that, “Sinners street”. Strange the Soviets didn’t change that one, a bit too religious, surely. Maybe they did, and it’s been changed back by the Latvians. The change of book meant the Bible went away and out came Buzzard’s latest book about the historical background of the Trinity, and another 101 Biblical reasons why the Trinity isn’t supported in the Bible. It’d been working out at a chapter a day. And they were short chapters, and someone as fluent in it all as Alison could ghost read it quickly. Off the tram, now that pleasant walk through the corner of the park, past the tomb of Oskars Kalpaks. Nearer to the office on Elizabetes Iela. What ever to write about... Thirty four years ago, well let’s say thirty years ago, it had been “Daddy! Give me a story!”. Same scene... give me a story, please, someone, anyone... a good one, too. Now that daddy... doesn’t want to talk to his little girl any more. Because she’s “out of fellowship”.

“Chow Alisa!” rung out down the cold and grey stairwell. The kind of stairwell that it seemed had never been anything other than cold and unwelcoming, right from its first construction. “Chow Ilze”, Alison less enthusiastically responded.

“I’ve this great idea for a story, you know it could even be a series”, Ilze enthused.

“Series? Ah, well, not often you can get a good *series*. One off shots are the best”.

“Ya but this is *different*. You know the black guys, the, you know, well, Asian looking guys, that we’re seeing around Riga now, well, I tracked it down to the kind of asylum centre down in Olaine”.

“Olaine?”, Alison queried.

“Olaine, well it’s about, well I don’t know, but, say, 40 minutes on the bus out of Riga, on the A7, the road down toward Lithuania, the one that goes through Jelgava. They’re asylum seekers, imagine, how they got here, their story, all that stuff, how Latvia is bankrupt and can’t support them, racism and all that”.

With a very slight element of needing to politely justify disinterest, Alison parried: “Sure, maybe you’re onto something, but for me, well, you’re a local journalist, I’m not, I’m kinda interested in... local people. Going to try to make some more contact with local churches, and get more into this Russian minority question”.

Ilze’s Latvian silence about “the Russian minority” lasted for a second long enough to make it just perceptible, before she skated on with her enthusiasm for asylum seekers: “Oh sure, good stuff, plenty of, well, plenty of material around on that one. And your Russian, you know, it’s just the best, better than mine even! Just ask, well, any of those *bomzh* who are begging further down Elizabetes, you know, Russians are very talkative, I’m sure you’ll get somewhere. Anyway, so, you want to come to Olaine today with me?”. Still figuring out what *bomzh* must mean, Alison pushed forward to the tea and coffee table, and from that secure corner could decline with grace and fuss about how the powdered milk was nearly gone, yet again.

But Ilze was back in the ring. She walked closer. “So, you don’t want to come, like, even with *me*? I mean, we could go together, have coffee together, I mean, doesn’t matter if it’s not your story, there are Russians you can talk to... well, everywhere. In Riga anyway. Alisa...”, Ilze mock pleaded and pouted her lips, “Even with... me? We could... be together and all that...?”

With an unusual air of definite finality, Alison put one hand on her hip and with the other awkwardly held her skirt. “Ilze”, she said in tones of sober seriousness, “Please, well, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression that time we had coffee together and talked about our feelings, but, well, sure you and I are both disappointed with men and that, but, let me say, I’m not a lesbian. I don’t want you to, well, misunderstand. I think you’re a great person, I really do, really, really I do. But, well, in that area, you know how they say in Russian, in that *oblast*...”

“I’m Latvian, remember. No need to show off your Russian to me”, Ilze retorted, and then raced on to the inevitable: “OK, OK, your choice, but... I’m disappointed, you really... hurt me. I had such hopes. But...but...”, and here the acted hurt seemed to change to a genuine enquiry, “Why? Reading that Bible of yours? I mean... why? Did you, like, get religious or something?”

Sensing a genuineness in at least that last part, Alison went on in quiet but gently firm explanation: “Well yes, in a way. But not *getting* religious. I was, as you know, very religious, very Christian, very, into the Bible and that, right from my childhood, and, yes, I am having a kinda revival”.

“You *went to* a revival?”, Ilze stabbed.

Curbing her desire to tell Ilze once and for all that she misunderstood something in almost every sentence, for all her much vaunted knowledge of English, Alison patiently explained further: “No, not a revival, like a church meeting. I don’t go to church. I mean a revival, a rebirth, *within* me. I really feel God speaking to me through the Bible, really feel it’s His word to me, and, well, I am a moral person, and, well, from what I see in the Bible, I, well...”

“Do you know how many times you use the word “Well?””, Ilze cut in, her blue eyes flashing against her bleached blond hair. “You’re like those Russians, they can’t speak a sentence without saying *kazhetsya, kazhetsya*, you know, ‘seems’, ‘seems’, ‘well’... same thing. Or another word they use, *vot*, that’s your “well” for you. Maybe they didn’t teach you that in your university Russian, but listen to them like I have all these years, it’s true. But I guess that’s a compliment to you. To tell you... that you’re style is like Russian style. So, go find yourself a Russian guy. They’re, you know, on every street corner”.

Speaking with the quietness of the truly nervous, Alison decided to tell Ilze more of her new revival: “OK, OK, I do, well, understand you’re going to feel hurt... I... just hope... we can work together still, you know, here, on the job and all that. But what I meant was that a few days ago I was reading the Bible, I started praying, and...”. Muttering something in Latvian which Alison didn’t understand, Ilze stormed out.

Alison was angry, but it was an anger tinged with the whiff of freedom. “New Frontiers” it said on the sweatshirt of the Russian cleaning lady, not that she had a clue what the words meant nor even sounded like, she only knew the Cyrillic alphabet. Alison had reflected on that several times, and she did so again as she stood on the balcony chain-smoking. A Russian guy... no. But... on the rebound? Is this the rebound? Surely not... that Ilze... she was really not a nice woman, hard as they come, self-obsessed. But, “Reach out of yourself, to others, for God, for Jesus, respond to His grace...”. Jim’s

words on that MP3 came back to her yet again. Alison didn't like praying cigarette in hand, it didn't feel quite right. But this time she did, for guidance, to be used.

Eleven thirty was coffee break time, but for Alison coffee break meant Coffee Nation. They had wifi there, whereas in the newspaper office there wasn't even internet. Enter those doors, you were back in the West. Menu only in English, waiters who at least knew waiters' English, pictures of Madrid, Lisbon and London on the walls. Three pronged British sockets beneath every table. At the traffic lights where Brīvības street crosses Elizabetes, there was a man holding a Costa Coffee cup.

"Going to Coffee Nation? Well I'm from the opposition, Costa Coffee, the one in the railway station. Can you spare your small change?"

With all the intonations of genuine surprise, Alison responded: "Your English is great! Where... did you learn to speak like that!? And, err... how did you know to speak with me in English? Do I... look that obvious?!"

As she reached for the coins in her coat pocket, Dmitry was quick on the response: "More shame on me, that I have to beg for money. You wouldn't guess where I learnt my English. Anyway, you're regular as clockwork, 11:25-11:30 you're crossing here as you go for coffee".

Alison responded in Russian to reassert that she was no dumb English speaker helpless on the streets of Riga: "Well I don't usually give money to... I don't usually give money on the street, but, take this for having such good English". Moving away from the crowd, Dmitry held her engagement in the conversation.

"You wanted to say, that you don't usually give money to a *bomzh*, ha".

Flustering just for seconds, Alison responded, again in Russian, careful to get her cases right: "So can you define for me more exactly in English, how you'd translate the word *bomzh*. I've heard it now twice today".

"*Bomzh*?", Dmitry smiled with a dash of nostalgia. "It's an old Soviet acronym, Bez Opredelonoe Mesto Zhitelstvo", without a defined place of living; what would you say, hobo? Or is that, like, American English? Tramp? Dosser? Homeless person? Even the Latvians use the word, you know, those who would never use a Russian word unless they totally have to". Alison nodded her head silently, processing the fact this guy knew English so well, despite a heavy Russian accent.

Not wanting to lose the conversation, Dmitry continued: "So what are you doing, like, here in Latvia, in Riga, right on this street?"

"Following where God led me... and, well, trying to be a journalist, trying to find stories".

"God?", Dmitry instantly responded, his sharp mind focusing on the significant word. And then, less sharply: "A journalist? So, you're gonna, like, go to Coffee Nation and write about me on your laptop?"

Alison noticed he had glanced over her breasts. Her overcoat was undone. Maybe time to move on. But something made her stay. "Yes, well, I don't mean I kinda had a vision from God or anything. I don't, well, don't go to church and all that. But yes, God...". The synergy was beginning:

"That's cool. I'm the same, not into church, well, not too much. Saw a lot of it. But God...". Dmitry fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out a New Testament. He opened it and showed her the

publisher and the date: “There you go. *Licht im Osten*, Light in the East, German missionaries to... us lot; see the date? 1978. These things were like gold dust, you know, back then...”. The synergy slightly clouded in Dmitry’s eyes. “Back then, well, you *wouldn’t* know, but, back then... this kind of thing was, well, not shall we say encouraged”.

Not knowing whether this was of God, just the rebound from Ilze or simply the loneliness of life as a foreigner in Riga, Alison invited him to Coffee Nation.

“Listen”, Dmitry said. “No photos, no story. Promise? If you are a believer, you will keep your word. OK?”.

“Sure”, Alison responded immediately. “The journalism, it’s a kinda hobby for me, really. God and that, that’s, I guess, the main thing for me”.

“Well OK, but, I mean, I’ll pay”, Dmitry responded. Alison couldn’t help but notice that he looked observantly over his shoulder a couple of times as they approached the door and entered.

With the weary attempt at politeness of the overworked waiter working for low pay in a land where tipping waiters is still in its infancy, the young man placed the coffee menus before the unlikely couple. Dmitry’s sharp eye skimmed the right hand side of the menu and couldn’t disguise a slightly raised eyebrow. “Well, what do you usually have?”.

“Oh, large cappuccino, sometimes with cheesecake”.

Large cappuccino... two Lats fifty. And cheesecake... nowhere to be seen on that menu. “Look, don’t worry, I can pay” Alison quickly offered. Dmitry flustered that he didn’t just today have quite that much on him. For the first time, Alison caught his eye, as she rushed to change the conversation and to act like the begging encounter of a few minutes ago simply hadn’t happened.

“Well OK, but if you buy the drinks, I have to talk, right? That’s the deal, isn’t it?” he joked, with just a very faintly wry smile.

Now it was Alison’s turn to be on the slightly defensive: “No, look, seriously, let’s talk. It’s cold out there, so, let’s drink coffee, I mean, it’s what I usually do here”.

“Well OK, so, what do you want to know?” Dmitry prodded, with the matter of fact glumness of the arrested criminal.

“To know? Not really. To understand, maybe. About, well, the Russian minority here, about God, about where He fits in, about, well, *you*, and, well, you and God, I mean, God and you”.

Whoever was buying the drinks didn’t stop Dmitry’s natural defensiveness on a sore point. “Russian *minority*? I know, they tell that to you, you Western people... that the Latvians are the majority and there’s just a few of us”. Realizing that using two “you”s in a sentence had come over rather threatening and dismissive of the woman who was after all paying for his coffee, he tried to make up: “But of course you’re a journalist, you speak Russian, I guess you’ve figured that out. After all, what language do you hear on the streets of this city? Russian, three times out of four. You know Russian, you must’ve noticed. And... OK, in the villages, sure, mostly Latvian, but half the population of this country lives here in Riga, if not more”.

Alison smiled. “Sure, I’m aware of that. And that you Russians have those mauve coloured passports, not the blue ones like Latvians have, *nepilsonas pases*, and that it means ‘not a person passport’ and

that it means nothing, you can hardly travel with it and you get no vote and hardly any social support, human rights etc. Yes, I know...”.

The once photographic memory of Dmitry picked up on her earlier comment. “You *know*... but do you *understand*...” he grinned. Slightly bashful, Alison replied that yes of course, she couldn’t quite understand, it wasn’t her in that position personally.

“You know, the difference between sympathy and empathy; you know the difference between those two words? I mean, the difference, like, in English?”.

With another look of well concealed slight offence, Dmitry came back on that one as he had before: “I know English, well. Sure, my accent is poor, I know, my grammar, well I mess up at times, I feel myself doing it at the time I do it even. But sure, I know those two words. Do you know them in... I mean, do you know... let’s say...”. Changing the direction of a sentence onto another theme isn’t always easy, and sometimes the theme chosen isn’t the one you want to get onto. “Do you know, can you guess, how I know English like I do?”.

Alison thought for a moment, her face showing she was enjoying the challenge. “Well maybe you lived in the West? But yes, your accent might be, different, let’s say”.

“*Better*, was the word you were searching for, right” Dmitry grinned back, his missing teeth showing rather clearly this time. There was a pause which lengthened to the point it became awkward. Dmitry knew it was his move. “Well OK, as, shall we say, as you would say, ‘A rule of thumb’, a Russian guy of my age who knows English, who knows English, some kind of *well*, you can be sure he was needed to know it by some, let’s say, organ, of the system we had, the USSR. God bless the USSR. May it rest in peace... and all that. And I suppose, typically, you could guess, maybe you should have guessed, if you know our people, our situation as it was here, yes, I was a military man, as my father was. Of course, I was an officer, and, well, I had to know English. And I liked English, really I did. I was no, what is the word...”. Dmitry paused, a distant look in his eyes. “OK, I think you don’t have exactly this word in English, but you will understand it, I wasn’t a *minimalist*, doing just what was needed to get by. I really, you would say, ‘Got into it’. And there were times, I needed it”.

Noticing the look of slight relief now on his contoured face, Alison jumped in to avoid any more awkward silences. “So you were somehow, dealing with Western people, like, espionage and stuff?”.

Dmitry smiled, charmingly. “Oh yeah, I was out there with James Bond and all that, like, in and out of London and planning to blow up your houses of Parliament”.

“No of course, I didn’t mean, that kind of stuff. I guess you were, say, in the office more”.

Again, Dmitry’s pride was just a tiny bit hurt. In a more serious tone he continued: “No, I was in Afghanistan. In... hell. I’m... I’m... an Afghan veteran”.

There was again a silence.

“I see. I... visited a rehab centre outside Moscow once, when I was doing some research, I mean, I did Russian at uni and I did a Master’s about attitudes to the Afghanistan war in Russian society now”.

“Uni?”

“Oh, I mean, university. Sorry”.

“OK. Learn a new word a day, that was what our English teachers used to tell us. Uni. Ha. University. Of course. I guess you could... write some articles for your newspaper about Afghan veterans walking the streets of Riga with Costa Coffee cups. You know, some of those men... and in their day, they were men... real men... those men on the streets, they were officers, high up ones, and now...”. Dmitry’s defiant bravery and military pride trailed away as he looked out of the window.

“Would you like another coffee?”.

“Actually, no. I’d... like to smoke. I don’t know if in these, these, these places, you can? But I know you are a believer, sorry, it’s not what you do I guess”.

With the brief momentary camaraderie there is between smokers, Alison caught his eye again. “Well, yes I am a believer, a real serious one. But I smoke too, at the moment. And yes you can smoke in here, you just have to ask them for an ashtray. It’s a kind of, kind of ritual with these guys”.

Relieved, Dmitry pulled out a box of Parliament Aqua Blue. He gingerly retrieved from the box a cigarette much smaller than the box was designed for. Alison pretended not to notice. The box... was a nice one, guess he keeps his butt ends he picks up in it. They smoked in silence.

“So what about you, the believer who smokes, your turn. I never met a believer who smoked. Not publically anyway. I met plenty of them, all very righteous and clean living and, you know the type”.

Alison was quick on the response. “But you’re a believer too, very impressive you carry that New Testament with you. Do you read it? Or is it kind of a... talisman? And you smoke, so, a believer who smokes it’s not...”

“An oxymoron” Dmitry proudly butted in. “Nah, just trying to impress you. Same word pretty well in Russian. But... maybe you know that. But I never thought of that. But then, I’m not really a believer much, I don’t go to church really”.

“I didn’t actually. I mean, I didn’t know “oxymoron” is the same in Russian. But you don’t have to be a churchgoer to be a believer. Abraham didn’t go to church. I don’t either”.

Partly to impress, partly in genuine contribution to the flow of conversation, Dmitry nodded soberly and added: “And Paul says, Galatians, somewhere in Galatians, that the Gospel was preached to Abraham”.

Alison’s eyes lit up. The Gospel was preached to Abraham in the form of the promises made to him. The Gospel is a golden thread running from Genesis to Revelation. All the stuff of Sunday evening lectures back there in Linden Hall. She could almost smell again the stuffiness of the hall, tinged as it always was with the aroma of furniture polish. The Christadelphians had been on and on about it. “The promises to Abraham”. She recalled her brother Steve giving his first public talk about them. He had even bought a new suit for the occasion. It was a sign of having somehow made it in the community. Alison had the impression that very few Christian groups had this perspective, and so she struggled to contain her enthralment.

“I... believe just the same. For me, those promises to Abraham are the basis of everything, God promised him Jesus, as his greater son, and that his great son would be a blessing and live forever on the earth, in the Kingdom of God, which I think, I mean, I believe, is going to be here on this earth. And then further on there in Galatians 3, Paul says that if we’re baptized into Jesus, then all that is true of Jesus becomes true of us, we too become the promised son, the “seed” it says in the older English Bibles, and we too will be blessed and be a blessing, and inherit the earth forever. That’s why, you know, we, I mean, I, don’t believe in going to Heaven when we die, we’re going to be unconscious until Jesus returns”.

Dmitry raised his eyebrows. “Wow. Party political broadcast. Where’d you learn *that* script from? I see... I see you’re, like, *really* religious, at least, you really know your stuff. But, maybe you can’t believe this, but, actually this is what I believe too. OK, I *think* I believe them, I am only just getting in to trying to accept the Bible as really being for me personally”.

It hadn’t been a script which Alison had consciously learnt. But she recognized as Dmitry was talking that that was how it had come over. The brainwashed young woman who hadn’t made good in her church and her family and had run away. To backwater Latvia. And who couldn’t escape her

upbringing, her religion. The dumb blond. Like Alan used to call her, half teasing but half serious. She felt it, keenly. So it was time to change the conversation. She had after all “preached the truth”. And as the old dears in the meeting back home used to say, You can’t give people too much at one time. So she asked about Afghanistan, explained how the place had fascinated her. She was itching to know what Dmitry had been doing out there which involved knowing English; but that had to come later.

“So Afghanistan, what did it feel like, being there as a, a kind of invader?”.

Inevitably, Dmitry fell deep for this one. With the joy of a person invited to talk about a hugely personally significant issue to someone all ears to listen, he launched off: “Well we were under the impression the Communist Government there had invited us, I mean, the Red Army, in there to as it were give them a hand, to help them. We, I mean, Soviets, had been sending aid out there for a while before we, I mean the army, moved in. First thing I saw as I walked off the troop transport in Kabul was a load of *pyatietazhniki*- you know?”.

“Yes”, Alison was quick to answer, “*Pyatietazhniki*, yes I know what you mean, the five storey apartment blocks which were built all over the USSR, they’re all over Riga, all over the place”.

Dmitry nodded briefly and quickly continued: “Well, there was a whole cluster of them, obviously built by our guys, right there by the airstrip, it was kinda, home from home. But then I saw dragged to one side of the aerodrome the remains of our MIG helicopters, and I thought oyoyoyoy... they’re able to fire SAMs right up to the airstrip, things must be pretty wild here. You know I was watching a documentary *just last week* about Afghanistan, and *they are still there*, those apartment blocks. I saw them just in the background of where the guy being interviewed was standing”.

Dmitry continued about his Afghan experiences, eyes glazing over at places, but with Alison never once needing to pull the face of merely polite attention. He shared how he had been involved in one on one contact, and had killed Afghan Mujahedin in cold blood, how the faces haunted him at night, the long beards and searching, sad eyes. Having apologized for going on so long in such a monologue, Dmitry asked a question with the air of someone who had long built up to this crunch point. Eye to eye he was almost breathless as he asked: “Do you believe me?”.

“Oh yes”, Alison quickly but seriously said. “It all has the absolute ring of truth about it. Absolutely. You... were, are, were, whatever, a very brave man... and I respect that you fought for principle that you believed in. Yes, I believe you”.

“OK. Thank you. Thank you. So I will complete the story a bit. The Americans were backing the Mujahedin against us. You know, the West are so simple, like, my enemies’ enemy is therefore my friend. Anyone who was fighting the USSR was good. But those guys, Mujahedin...”. Dmitry’s eyes now had real hate in them. “The Mujahedin who fought us, they became the Taliban, the ones America’s fighting now. But back then, the West were backing the Moslem extremists, they were armed with western weapons, they had Americans out there training and advising them how to fight us, how to lay land mines, yes land mines, which the West now condemn as, you know...”.

“Yeah, not, kinda, *kosher* and all that according to the rules of war...”.

“Exactly. Then, they were teaching them to lay landmines, to blow *us* up... I drove over them. A few times. Had them explode behind me. I think it was then I knew God’s grace. After all the murders I performed, I expected that Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Tolstoy, *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Solzhenitsyn, *August 1914*, you know they all make the same point and make it well and... *ubyedyelny*, what’s your word... *persuasively*, yes persuasively, that it would all come back around to me and I too would die, you know, die a violent death as I had given others. But... I didn’t. I understood God’s grace before I knew God Himself. I remember once we drove over one, there was the explosion behind us, and my driver said “My God, what was that?” and I said, “That was my God”. And that was before I really even believed in God. Anyway, summing up, there were American agents trying to make contact with the Mujahedin, setting them up to ambush us and

all that. I posed as an American agent, the Mujahedin, I mean, they hardly spoke English so a bit of accent and a few grammar mistakes by me weren't noticed. I got close to the Mujahedin leadership and then set up ambushes to kill them. And... and... as I explained, there were some times when I had to do the job myself, or, you know, it was my life or theirs”.

After some more chit chat, with God, religion, the Russian language and Afghanistan as the themes which cycled around in various orders, Alison was surprised to learn Dmitry had a mobile phone. No credit on it, but, usual story, I'll give you a missed call and you call me back. Her journalist's ability to perceive an extraordinary intellect had been fully exercised. The stories she picked up in the Baltic backwater were pretty standard stuff involving pretty standard people. Here was someone in a different league. He asked to leave Coffee Nation alone, in case one of 'his guys' saw him with a foreigner. If anyone saw him exiting, he could pass it off as having gone in there to use their washroom.

Before he left, Dmitry held Alison's gaze in a grip of iron intensity: “I want to say one thing. I have been praying to God a lot lately, although I am not sure what exactly I am asking Him for; basically, to come close to Him, for a person I can trust to bring me to Him. And His Son. I rarely, if ever, share my story with people. I do not know why I have done so with you. I just got the feeling as we were sitting here, that somehow my prayers might be answered. So... well, how to finish...”.

As his eyes glazed slightly and the intensity faded, Alison stepped in to make an appropriate ending: “I have the strong feeling God meant this meeting, after all, any meeting is in a sense from Him. Nothing is of chance. I don't think I'm the one, really, to be able to help you, but maybe, who knows, I can play a part in... some process. I'd love to chat again... I'll call you, OK?”.

“OK. Err... thank you”.

And so began a series of meetings, discussing theology, God, the Bible, doctrines... over expensive coffees.

CHAPTER 2

The *Bomzh*

It had been not a bad day for Dmitry at the Maxima supermarket car park. This was where those who had money in Riga did their shopping, driving there and grabbing a shopping trolley. The trolleys operated on a 20 Santims or 1 Lat system; you put the coin in, and then returned the trolley to a trolley shed in the car park after unloading it, and got your coin back. The game was to follow shoppers to their cars and then offer to take the trolley off them and wheel it back to the trolley shed, and then you got to keep the coin. Dmitry and Igor worked as a pair. Occasionally the supermarket staff would come out to collect the trolleys, pushing them into the store in a long snaking line. If they saw any *bomzh* following and hassling shoppers, a call to the Police was all sufficient. So one would stand by the entrance and wolf-whistle when the staff were coming out to collect the trolleys.

“Better be getting back now, it’s four already, and the *kontrol* are awful if we leave it much later, especially on trolley 25. And if we don’t get that, it’s tram six and walk” Igor said, pursing his lips in the frankness of street wisdom. Igor had no teeth, and his lower lip tended to lodge under his upper lip when he spoke. Coupled with his way of getting eye contact, peering into your face and tapping your arm when he talked to you, he liked to give the impression that he knew what you didn’t.

“But it’s good here today for some reason, usually we reckon one coin every hour, and today we scored a Lat twice rather than 20 Santims”, Dmitry mused.

“Dim, son, listen. There you are on the 25, *kontrol* get on, we’re riding with no ticket, frog marched off the bus by them, strip searched, and every *kopek* taken off us. So what’s the point. Son, time to go. Quit while the going’s good. But you’re right, it wasn’t a bad day. I even got *three* smokes. Didn’t want to give me the trolley but gave me a smoke. And one of them was from a *woman*. And a cute one too.”, Igor responded, with a total of three taps on Dmitry’s arm. When there was no shopper to shadow to their car, the other activity was to gather cigarette butts, especially from the ashtrays near the supermarket entrance, and extract the tobacco into a tin, to be later rolled up and smoked.

They sat at the trolleybus stop and rolled up the day’s takings. Igor took a New Testament from his pocket, tore a page out and rolled up. Dmitry’s native anger flared: “What are you doing that for! How can you! Where d’you get that from? From Samuel’s on Sunday? That’s just the type he gives out. How *can* you? No self-respect? You *so* in the gutter? Can’t you do what I do and use newspaper, can’t you even give one 20 Santim coin to buy some papers if you can’t stand newspaper?”.

Slightly taken aback but not really phased, Igor justified himself: “But it’s only a book. Black print on white paper. And Samuel, yeah he’s a good guy. Good son. But he’s got *boxes* of the things down there at the Centre. *Boxes*. Not everyone gets to go out the back there, but *I did*. And a *couple of times* too. There’s *boxes* of New Testaments there. And there’s nothing that quite rolls up well like that thin Bible paper. Newspaper...”, Igor’s bottom lip well beneath his upper lip, “newspaper, it spoils the whole taste, and it’s bad for you, who wants all that grunge and black ink down your inside?”.

“Black ink?”, Dmitry queried, still angry: “None of that in the Bibles?”.

“Dimchik, son. Do you really believe all that stuff? You know there were real scientists, *our* guys, the real ones, Soviet ones, they looked into all that stuff. Debunked it. Guys who finished Moscow State University. Got their doctorates. They debunked it. Every bit of it”.

Dmitry didn’t try concealing his disdain: “So why do you go to church, go to Samuel’s? Just for the food afterwards? There’s a God above you know. Yes, I believe it. All of it. You talk about *our* guys. But it was our guys who *really* believed in God. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. Forget Stalin, he was, you know, a Georgian, not really one of ours. But our guys at the end of their days, Brezhnev, Andropov,

Khrushchev, they all said at the end that there was a God. Just, it wasn't reported, but it's all coming out now".

Igor smiled knowingly. "Dimchik. Dimchik. You're not a bad son. But son, don't believe all you read in the newspapers these days. Let alone on that internet thing, or whatever they call it. It's all influenced by the West. Journalists making up stories. In our days, newspapers were about free. Now, all for money. Best story sells the most. I met Andropov once", Igor proudly nodded his head, "Out in Krasnoyarsk. He was reviewing the *Komsomol*, there in Revolution Square, just by the railway station there, and I was a youth leader in the *Komsomol*, he shook my hand. Great man, true man. And anyway, having a smoke in a piece of Bible paper, it's, kinda, kinda something holy".

Dmitry inwardly smiled at the irony of how that would translate into English as something like "holy smoke". But Igor only barely knew the Latin alphabet, he would often ask Igor what a sign said or what a street name really said, he knew no English nor Latvian. Not even the alphabet. But no point trying to share the "holy smoke" observation with Igor Rodionovich. Dmitry was glad when trolleybus 25 came. You had to keep biting your lip with Igor. Just no point arguing back with him. Dmitry had so often muttered to himself that the worst thing about being down and out was the company you had to keep.

Having reflected how hard it was going to be to sit next to Igor at church next Sunday, Dmitry remembered that he needed a friend, at least a solid helper. Someone to help him get 10 Lats to take Alison out and pay for it for a change. It was getting too much for his masculinity to see her paying each time. From the bus station where the trolleybus stopped, they walked in silence through the market and along Maskavas street parallel to the Daugava River, through what used to be the Jewish ghetto. The Latvians renamed most of the Soviet era streets in Riga, Lenin Prospekt became Brīvības, Independence, street. But for some reason Moscow street wasn't renamed. It was just changed into a Latvian spelling: Maskavas. The two men came to a small shop and instinctively glanced behind them as they walked in. There was a customer. They waited till he had been served and had left. Then there was some unspoken communication between them and the weary looking Russian woman behind the counter. They handed over some of their coins, and she brought out from under the counter some out of date bread, unbranded tins of sardines and mouldy bananas. They produced as if by auto response their plastic bottles, which she filled from a tap.

Outside, sitting on a bench with only one bar left on it, the silence was broken by Igor. "So, I've got 60 Santims left. You know about the new *tochka*? Just down there, toward the river, back of Bārdziņu number eight, knock on the gate twice, say you need to make a delivery. And you're in. She opens, gives you the bottle, you're done. Just, she never has any change, son. So beware of that. Exact change only please. *Cheap* it is, cheapest there is in Riga I'd say". With his trademark tap of the arm and knowing nod Igor had to add the inevitable: "Not widely known about. Keep that one between the two of us".

Dmitry raised his eyebrows in despair. "You remember Helmut, that Latvian guy who was with us in the night shelter? Blind. Blind. From drinking that cheap vodka. And anyway, I'm trying to get through that part of my life. I know, you say I got religion and all that, but, there's another way to live, to be. I mean, we didn't always live like this did we, gathering coins, buying stale bread, killing ourselves with duff vodka from some *tochka*".

"Ahh", Igor replied with a grin, "It's just you've gotta know your vodka, know your cards. There's bad stuff about", Igor wisely nodded, "But that Latvian guy, yes, I know. But... he was an idiot, he was absolutely *ignorant* about everything, yeah sure he'd be the type to fall for that kind of vodka".

The *bomzh* can discuss alcohol for hours on end, and Dmitry didn't want to get into the discussion yet again: "OK Igor, well the bottom line is that, I kinda need your help tomorrow. Maybe you could, you know, just hold off till tomorrow evening?".

Igor's eyes lit up. "My assistance? Sure. You've come to the right fella. Deal done".

“But you don’t know what the deal is”, Dmitry smiled back, almost with fondness for his irritating neighbour. “It’s just that, I need 10 Lats by tomorrow afternoon. I’ve been thinking, and I have a plan”.

“*Desyatka*, son. *Desyatka* means ten of those 1 Lat coins rolled into one piece of paper with ‘10 Lats’ written on it. Yes son. I know. And you need one of *them*. Hmmmm...”. With another knowing nod and tap, this time on Dmitry’s chest, Igor continued: “Not gonna get one of *them* from Maxima. I can tell you that. No chance. Not by tomorrow afternoon anyway. But... what do you want it for? Documents?”. The usual story of the *bomzh* was that whilst drunk, they were robbed. They could leave nothing in the night shelters, and had to carry their belongings with them in plastic bags from when they were thrown out at 8 a.m. to when they could get back in at 8 p.m. So they carried their documents with them. There was a black market in documents and identities. They had to pay between 10 and 20 Lats to get new documents, which they typically could never raise.

“No, not documents. I’ve got mine. I’ve just... got some debts, kinda, private stuff”, Dmitry replied. There was no private life for the *bomzh*, life in a strange way was lived publically. There was in the night shelters a tall poppy syndrome, anyone who rose above the standard pattern of existence, or who looked likely to, had to be chopped down to size. Money was needed for drink and to get over problems which came from having been drunk. Nothing else.

“I heard you’ve been in and out of Coffee Nation” Igor stated matter of factly, “Nation, *nay-shon*, not nat-ee-on”, he proudly repeated with relish.

The years of practising not to go wide eyed when it appeared you’d been busted were again valuable for Dmitry. He had a flashback to the hillside bunker out of Mazar-e-Sharif, years ago. “Yeah, the toilets there are cool alright. Mirrors on the ceiling”. He wanted to add “The pink champagne on ice”, but knew that would be an allusion wasted on Igor. “Cream soap out of dispensers, even a saucer where they leave tips for the cleaner. But I got chased out in the end”.

Now Igor’s eyes faintly lit up with understanding. “Ah, I see. You’re a smart one. Coins in the saucer hey. Wonder how you guessed that would be there”. Igor nodded his head slowly. “Mmm. I see. How it is, son. State of the nation. I’ll check them out myself some time. Not, you know, for the saucer and all that, just, you know, for the cream soap and all that”. There was silence for a moment, broken by Igor: “So. To drink or not to drink. Coz tomorrow you want me straight and strong. So son, spill it, what’s the job?”.

“Straight and strong Igor, you’ll need to be. Here it is: You know the scrap metal merchant further up Maskavas, Georgij. Just under the new bridge. Well, I need to take him something”.

“Woa, son! Drain hole covers, you remember what happened to Volodya. Good fella. Vadim ran off, cops chased him, didn’t get him. But Volodya, busted. Busted. All the motorists, the rich kids, complaining their BMW’s keep hitting the holes. Breaks the axles, you know. No good for the suspension. Serves them right, the rate they drive”, Igor spoke nodding almost constantly in the certainty of street wisdom. “No Igor, not drain covers”. But Igor was on a roll: “The other thing, son. I’m a principled fella. I know you think I’m not coz I rolled a smoke in Bible paper, but I am. Brezhnev, great autobiography, read it in the library. Talks about the principled world, how we were principled, how socialism, USSR, we stood for *principle*, but this capitalism stuff is *unprincipled*, no conscience, no care for anyone, no respect. Leonid Nikolayavich Brezhnev”, Igor mused with pride, rambling strongly: “Now *there* was principle. And those drain covers, they’re, like, *ours*. Heavy stuff, real heavy metal. It’s written on them, a kind of code, and then in our Cyrillic ‘LSSR’ and the date they were made. LSSR. Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. Breaks my heart that our guys are now so desperate they have to swipe them and sell them to those German scrap metal merchants, selling our soul, to them, to the Nazis. No son, those drain covers were made by us, they’re ours, couldn’t bring myself to sell them just so they get melted down. Call me... call me... what’s the word... nostalgic... sentimental... but nope. I couldn’t”.

Dmitry wearily recalled Igor to reality, wondering if alcohol had addled Igor's brain more than it seemed: "I'm not talking about drain covers. Just listen. There's a big metal bollard that got knocked right over, seems by a lorry, it'd been lying there with the concrete attached to it. On the corner of Artilērijas and Bruņinieku, by the park and monument there. I noticed a couple days ago that someone's knocked the concrete off it. So... it's just lying there waiting to be picked up. There's a chance that whoever knocked the concrete off it is planning to pick it up some time soon. But if we just ghost it, they won't know who did it. And Georgij, he takes that kind of stuff. No markings on it. No identification. And there's a scrap metal merchant coming in his truck tomorrow night to him from Germany. I checked it all out. We've just gotta... get it to him. Only problem is, it's heavy. Real heavy. Dunno if we could carry it between the two of us, may need three. We could roll it a bit. Just will be difficult getting it on and off the tram. It's four stops on the number four tram from there to Georgij's place".

Processing it all for some time, Igor asked: "And what's my cut? I mean, I've got a hernia. The polyclinic said it'd be 180 Lats. And that was *cheap*. I, like, spoke nicely to the girl. No PK, no discount, no nothing. So hate the way they always ask you in Latvian *Vai Persons kods ir?*, 'Have you got a Personal Code?', they know full well we're Russian *bomzh* and we have no PK, we're nobodies and nothing. So, no hernia operation. And you want me to help you shift... how much? 100 kilos?". "Yeah I reckon it's at least 100. Well as to your cut, I need 10 Lats. Whatever else Georgij gives, you can have. Of course, he knows who we are, I mean he's just down the road from our *priut*, we're Maskavas 207 and he's I guess Maskavas three hundred and something; he knows we're *priutsky*. He says he'd need to see what grade metal it is, so for sure he'll say it's no good and give us a low price. You might get 10, you might get 100. Dunno. But that's the deal. I take the first 10".

For once, Igor's meditation and slow nodding of his head was actually about something significant and important. "OK", he declared. "The deal is done". Pretending he had a small hammer in his hand, he motioned as if he were tapping a table. "Decision taken. Georgij... it'll be like that Samuel was saying in church the other week, from that book, one of Solomon's books, that the buyer always says "It is nothing" and then rejoices. You know, that book, about in the middle of the Bible. See, son, I'm not some blasphemer, I listen to the talks, I don't just come for the grub. But what time?".

"The *ment*, the cops, change over shifts between 5:30 and 6:00. Let's do it then. Get it into the second carriage of the tram, the driver can't see into that from the front of the first carriage".

"OK. And if the *ment* do catch us, what's the story? You know, they're always driving around in their cop cars".

"I told you Igor. The Police change over shifts between 5:30 and 6 in the morning on weekdays. Bit different at weekends. I'm not up to speed on that. Seeing you know it all I'd've thought you knew that much. That's prime time. And... you know, I prayed about this. Yeah, I prayed to God about it. Jesus said, He would put the words in our mouths when needed. And... of course... not a word to anyone, right?".

"Absolutely. You know me. Lips sealed. But you and your Bible, son! You make me smile sometimes. Really. The Man upstairs... yeah, He brought me through a few things. You're right on that much. Down there at Super Netto that night. The glass was smashed and I had blood oozing from my hand and the plank of wood a meter away from me, just they couldn't see it in the dark, and they appeared out of nowhere and said 'Did you do this?', the alarm was ringing and red lights flashing and there I was standing there, and I just said 'No your Lords, I'm a *bomzh* I was just dossed down by the flowerbed and then all this happened, wondered whatever was happening, and I heard fellas shouting and running off over there into the apartment blocks, and can you gents spare an old army officer a smoke'. And they never touched me. Even gave me a smoke. Then went racing off in their Police cars trying to find who they thought'd done it. Yeah, the Man upstairs alright".

“That was grace, Igor. God’s grace. Not just good luck. I mean, that you not only got off but you got a smoke out of them. Well, I think I’m right. Probably... yeah, probably it was all the same God’s grace. I mean, shopbreaking Igor, that’s a bit much”.

Igor smiled mischievously and proudly, remembering the incident. He then tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. “You may be right. I know, Samuel’s on about it every time, grace. Grace. God’s grace. Undeserved favour and all that. Like, God likes being kind for, well, for the kinda fun of it. Yes. Maybe”.

Dmitry and Igor took their place in the line of men lining up outside the night shelter at Maskavas 207, each clutching their bag of possessions. Soon they were in conversation with others, discussing the day, stories of 20 Santim pieces being found, who got what from where, brushes with the cops, the change of staff at the Salvation Army, the rude Latvian women at *sotsialka*, the Social Services. Smelling each others’ breath to check there was no whiff of alcohol. And then the doors opened and the men filed in. Two Latvian women, Skaidrite and Astride, stood there with a strong lamp shining down on the men. They looked each one and up and down and had a sentence of conversation with each of them to see if they were slurring their words. There was a small table where there was a breathalyzer and a list of names. Anyone suspected of having been drinking was breathalysed and rejected. Those registered had to sign their names. Any newcomers had to sign a separate form.

The bright lights of the entrance lobby soon changed to a dingy colour as they filed down the corridor and into the dormitories. Six two tiered bunk beds were in each dormitory. The men left their bags there, packed anything valuable into their overcoats and then walked along the dimly lit corridor to the dining hall. They had to again sign in. Those with *status maloimushie*, ‘Few possessions status’, got a meal in the night shelters. Those without it, or who had lost or sold their identity or had it stolen whilst drunk, couldn’t have a meal. Skaidrite had long scrapped the rule about not taking overcoats into the dining hall, and the coat stand in there had been removed a year ago. All these men had was in their jackets, and suspicion of petty theft was everywhere. It was as much as Skaidrite could do to insist that they take their jackets off and put them on the back of their chairs. And even then as they lined up in the food line, there was constant looking back at their chairs. The men took their bread, two pieces of equal size, from the hands of Irma, and their bowls were filled with goulash by Laima. The two young women were distinctly nervous of the Russian men. They averted eye contact and just did their job. There was rarely the need to speak anyway. When everyone had finished, Skaidrite came round with an apple for everyone. “Hurry up with your food Leonid. You’re always holding everyone up. People have to shower and it’s already 21:00”.

“You sound like my mother. Bless her. She used to tell me that when I was a child” mumbled 76 year old Leonid.

“One strike!” shouted Skaidrite. “One more step out of line, and you’re out. And it’s cold out there”.

“Well it was a kind of compliment really, to say you remind me of my mother”, Leonid dared to respond.

“Enough talking and more eating from you please” Skaidrite officiously replied. Realizing she’d somewhat overstepped the mark, she walked out of the dining hall. The relative silence was broken by a hum of quiet conversation. “She would’ve applied to work in Auschwitz. She’d’ve loved it”. “Don’t worry Leonid Ivanovich. Take your time old man”. “She puts on that accent. She can speak Russian much better than that. Always emphasizing the first syllable of our words, like she’s speaking Latvian. Just coz they have to in their dogs’ language doesn’t mean they have to when they speak our language”. “She’s only half Leonid Ivanovich’s age”. “Give little people a little power. Typical of this country”. “She hates men. Feel sorry for her husband”. “She should get a job doing something else. Lavatory attendant, maybe”. “Nice answer Leonya. That shut her up”.

Skaidrite eventually returned with a large box of broken biscuits. “Some good news, gentlemen. I’ve decided to extend lights out to 10:30 tonight”. There was no grateful response as the tone of her voice

implied she had hoped for. "I noticed from the TV programmes in *Neatkariga* newspaper that your Alla Pugachova is playing in Leningrad, or what do you now call it, Saint Petersburg, in some park there, and it's being broadcast live on your channel tonight. So I'll put it on till ten *thirty* in the lounge".

The *bomzh* forgave easily. A cheer went up. "Pugachova! Live!". "Is it true she stripped topless at her last show in Moscow?". The men returned to their rooms, rummaged in their bags for bits of soap and whatever they would use as a towel, and went into the shower cubicles. Those who wished to. Only one bulb was working in the shower block, and once the door was shut on the cubicle you were pretty well in pitch darkness.

Some went to lay down on their bunks, a few played chess with improvised pieces made from paper, others took a Bible or the book *Bible Basics* from the so called "library" which Leonid had set up on a spare plank of wood in the lounge, filling it with books he'd taken from Riga Bible Centre, also known as "Samuel's place". The readers sat on their beds reading either the Bible or *Bible Basics* or paperback novels they'd found in garbage cans or in the "Giveaway" box at the Salvation Army. The rest piled into the lounge to hear Alla Pugachova. Skaidrite had to hold the battered remote right up to the television to get it to change channels from the Latvian one which her and the girls had been watching in the afternoon to the Russian one.

"There you are. Your beloved Pugachova". Dmitry usually read but admittedly it wasn't every evening you had a chance to see Pugachova on TV. "She's *such* a good singer... such good words". The compliments went on and on. "She could be big in the West even". "Yeah she's as good as... all those famous groups they have there. Abba". "Clapton. Eric Clapton". "Springsteen". "Roll-eenga Ston-yez". Igor had to have his say: "Punk Flead-ye". "Someone ought to translate her songs into English, now there's a thing, she'd be just... *kolossalnaya*. Colossally popular there in the West".

Dmitry bowed his head between his knees and laughed, deeply. Really. Pugachova's songs translated. "Born in the USSR", wasn't that her greatest hit, topped the Russian charts for weeks on end. All about how she was born in Krasnogorsk, Red Mountain, worked her way up through the *Komsomol*, the Communist Youth League, and then the chorus, about how she strutted her stuff in tight Red Army military uniform... And these guys think she'd be a hit in the West. Yeah right. *As if*. But still... it *is* a great song. For us. For me. But time to read my New Testament portion and hit the sack. Interesting day tomorrow. And... yeah, gotta pray. "Ish Allah", those Afghans used to say. The will of God shall be done. But... we... we have more freewill than they ever thought. Not all about *submission* to Divine will... we're in *dialogue* with God... so Samuel said... strange guy. Enigma. Real enigma. Jewish as. But he's got something, got a lot... Alison. Nice figure. Needs to get her cases right, rest of her grammar is OK. Naive as. Georgij, that moron Igor, 100 kilos, God, Jesus, Abdullah, "plee-yaz, dornot, dornot keel mee". Dmitry drifted into sleep.

Lights out was indeed at 10:30. And silence did indeed reign after 11, just as Skaidrite's shrill Latvian voice demanded. But the noise levels were higher by 2 a.m. than they were at 11 p.m. The snoring of 12 men in a small room, all smokers and some with TB, was quite something. Dmitry couldn't sleep well in that company and lay there on the top bunk staring at the empty lamp socket above him. He heard snatches of whispers coming from the bunk the other end of the room. He wasn't sure who was talking. But they were talking about him. "Coffee Nation... four times now... Western woman... Igor... he says he's just using the toilet there...he's got a plan... money...". Fear gripped Dmitry. He was suddenly wide awake. The level of fear and heart pounding was for some reason to the same extent as the moment Abdullah's father had looked into his eye that evening near Mazar-e-Sharif and said "We know who you are. You're a Russian. You're an agent. You're only pretending to be an American". And the guilt he felt was for some reason the same as he felt as he wiped the man's blood off his hands onto the grass and dragged the body into the corner of that bunker, trying to forget that the guy's young teenage son was watching. Dmitry always remembered the man not as his real name, Hasim, but rather as "Abdullah's father". To kill a man in front of his young son...is unforgiveable. They were so similar. They both had a huge blotch on their right cheeks. It had been like killing a cat in front of its watching kitten, and they both had the same markings, say, they each had three white

feet. No matter how he told himself that the thing with Alison was no guilt, nothing wrong, no murder, quite the opposite in fact, and so what if he got busted for stealing a bollard, so what if he had coffee with a woman in Coffee Nation... the feelings of fear and guilt were no less than that evening in Mazar. And, drunk or sober, so many evenings since.

CHAPTER 3

The Gulag Archipelago

The bollard job went like clockwork. 120 kilos of high grade scrap was worth about 300 Lats to Georgij, and 500 Lats to the shady Russian-German scrap dealer who came with his truck to buy up that kind of material and drove it back to Berlin. Georgij predictably passed it off to Dmitry and Igor as low grade and worthless. “I’m not really that interested, to say honestly. Maybe 80 Lats, OK, I see you’re from the shelter, I’ll give you 100. I feel sorry for you guys there. Something’s broken in this country. I know, no PK, can’t do anything or get anywhere. All depends on that Persons Kods. So... here you are”. He handed them four twenties and two tens.

Igor really couldn’t believe his luck, but as his manner was, he nodded knowingly. “And that was below price, son. Believe me. I know the market. So... I get 90? That was the deal wasn’t it” he said, fingering his moustache.

“OK, you needed ten, take the two tens”.

Struggling to control his irritation but too proud to renege on the deal, Dmitry took his two tens. He was even the more irritated knowing that Igor would be heading to the bottle store and would gather around him more of the same type. Those eighty Lats would be gone by the evening. Dmitry parted with words which he knew were words into the air: “Remember, not a word to anyone about where it came from”.

“My lips are sealed, come on, you know me”, Igor responded predictably.

The first thing Dmitry wanted to buy was one Lat of credit on his phone. The encounter with the girl in the kiosk left a bad taste in his mouth. She wearily slid back the window of the kiosk, regretting every second of lost hot air.

“Rybka. Latik”. One Lat credit for the Rybka network. Everybody in Latvia, at least in Riga, knew that “Rybka” means “little fish” in Russian, and referred to the network called in Latvian “Zelta Zivtina”, “Little gold fish”, the most popular mobile network. But the 19 year old Latvian was tired of Russian customers from the night shelter spending their pennies. She insisted she didn’t understand whatever *Rybka* might refer to. And closed the little window. Dmitry let out an exasperated sigh, which hung for a moment in the subfreezing air. He wandered to another kiosk, where the woman was keener for business than principle.

“Hi, Alison, it’s Dmitry here. About our meeting, I was...”

“Oh hi, I’ll call you right back!” Alison interjected excitedly.

“No no it’s OK”, Dmitry firmly replied. “I was wondering whether we could meet tomorrow at another coffee place, Double Coffee, it’s, you know, the same... err... standard as Costa and Coffee Nation. The one near the central bus station”.

Alison did wonder at the change of venue but saw nothing unduly amiss. Ilze had been really quite horrible, sometimes there seemed even a madness in her eyes when she spoke. She had been flaunting her new “friend”, another bleached blond, from Sweden or some Scandinavian country. So why not accept Dmitry’s proposition. Even if he was a *bomzh*. But Double Coffee near the Bus Station... OK, the new one there.

That night, Dmitry was beaten up by some other *bomzh* near the night shelter on Maskavas. Strangely, they didn’t want money. He survived the beating and strangely enough, the nine Lats he had in his pocket wasn’t even demanded nor taken. That night he wondered whatever the motive could’ve been.

Igor wasn't in the shelter that night, obviously lying drunk somewhere in the freezing night. Maybe it was something Igor had told someone about him. But the planned meeting with Alison where he would pay, and the fact he felt God had by grace left him with the nine Lats, meant he didn't probe the matter too deeply in his mind. For once, he couldn't wait for morning to come as he lay down to sleep.

Scarcely concealing his pride, Dmitry held the door open for Alison. They sat down and Dmitry opened the menu for Alison. "Take what you want", he invited, carefully concealing his nervousness that the total might come to over nine Lats. Alison smiled. "So you came into some money from when I first met you, ha". Dmitry shrugged, the lines on his forehead purposefully exaggerated, it seemed. "Well I work a bit, sometimes good, sometimes bad. Just, without a PK you can never get proper employment".

"PK? Ah, *Persons Kods*, the ID number people have here, like, for social security, for when they work, to get a tax number".

"Right. But there are people here in this country, lots of us, who don't have one. You read how after the 1917 Revolution, there were our Russian aristocrats and, you know, that group associated with them, who were busking on the streets of Paris. I've read how in England in the 1930s there were Jewish university professors who'd escaped Germany who were, like, shifting the garbage in Manchester. And although the West doesn't want to know, there are people like... well there are a lot of highly qualified people, men, women, who were really something in the USSR, who are... well, you know. Begging on the streets, working on the black. In your terms, to put it like you might understand it, it must be like the scene of poor whites in Zimbabwe, Rhodesia, whatever it's now called, begging the blacks for a few dollars".

"Yes... But you know, I have been around the USSR, doing research and stuff, I do... feel for you guys."

Alison went on to break the awkward silence. "But, I know it's easy for me to say this, but if we're true Christians, there's grace, the grace thing I spoke about before. We can't just look back in anger, keep on about "bitter harvest", if we can't forgive and move on... we're the ones who, you know, suffer. Sorry... that must all sound very naive".

"It does, it is, but then, I know what you're saying. The men lying on the streets drunk on *tochka* vodka, the illegally brewed stuff, the army officers, the Colonels, the onetime factory managers, they spend their time, as you put it, looking back in anger. But then, life is life, it has to be lived. I know you think I'm a bit against Latvians and that. But there's a Russian saying, perhaps you know it: The bird and the fish probably even love each other, are even in love with each other. But the question is, Where to live. It's very true of the situation here. I actually like Latvians in my own way. They sing, so beautifully. And their country is flat as a pancake, but, in its own way, it's very... "cute" is the word I think you would use about it... you use it, seems, about everything. But the Latvians can't live outside Latvia. I accept it's their country. And we Russians, well we were either born here, or are *priezhih*. You can check out any time you like, rant and rave about it, but you can never leave. Kinda, Hotel California. It's what people used to say about the USSR, that you could go live in another cell for a bit, but never leave. Like, go to the West and all that".

"*Priezhih*? Those who came?".

"Yes, that's what they call those who are Russians like me, who came here. I was born in a small town in the Urals, Talitsa, Sverdlovskaya Oblast. Out there... -40 Winters, but still as anything, no wind factor, not like here in the Baltics, where it's not so cold, but so much... *vlaga*, what do you say, humidity, moisture, in the air. So it feels so much colder. But what I mean is that we can't return, we haven't got the right documents, we're stuck here. And I don't think that the Latvians really hate us, not for the most part. They are even a bit, even, fond of us. Just... we can't live together. Bit like a bad marriage".

Another awkward silence interposed, as Dmitry thought of the young Latvian woman in the kiosk who wouldn't speak with him in Russian, and Alison thought of Ilze. Neither of them could break this silence very easily. The conversation was revived in fits and starts about life in Riga, Russian grammar, English pronunciation oddities, but there was a reserve on both sides. Until Dmitry blurted out: "OK. Look, I'm here, and paying for your cappuccino, because there's something I *really* want to talk about".

Alison's eyes expressed serious interest. "Well, I actually feel the same. There's something I also want to talk about. But you go first".

"Ladies first", Dmitry grinned, missing teeth evident again, the tension starting to break.

"No... I'm a bit shy. What is it you so want to talk about? I sense there really is something big for you on your mind".

There was another silence.

"OK, let's play a little game. Let's write down what we both want to talk about, just a sentence, and see if it's the same. Sorry if it's a bit childish, but... I also really want to ask you about some things too. I *really* want to. It'll be interesting to see if they... *sovpadaetsya*, is that what you say, 'come together as the same'".

"That is a bit childish, like we're young teenagers. But... OK. What to do".

Dmitry passed her a serviette and took one for himself. Alison wrote on hers: "What you said about the Bible. Your views seemed the same as mine", folded the serviette and put it to one side. She then realized he didn't have a pen, and handed him hers. Dmitry wrote: "Kingdom of God on earth. Galatians. Do you believe Jesus is God. Is He part of the Trinity".

They swapped serviettes, and simultaneously burst out laughing. Dmitry touched her hand. "*Zayimna!*". Alison felt a warmth of electric energy flow through her as he touched her like that. "Touché!".

There was no longer any reserve, nor any question about who went first, as they spilled their theological beans. The waitress looked on from her corner, fascinated. Each with their Bibles, talking at once, animated... and somehow more than animated, some other element was present.

"1 Timothy 2:5... one God *and*, like, in addition, one mediator between God and man, *the man* Christ Jesus".

"Yup, hear O Israel, the Lord your God is *one*, I had to learn that as a proof text in Sunday School. Jesus was tempted, God can't be".

"You sound like the guy at our church. Jesus died, God can't die, men saw Jesus, you can't see God. And he's always on about the practical side of it, Hebrew, I think it is, the letter to Hebrews, something about because Jesus was tempted like us therefore He can help us who are tempted... come boldly to God in prayer because we have a High Priest who was like us...".

And so their discussion went on, about how Jesus was of human nature, the supreme human representative, although also Son of God.

"But... what do you think about whether He existed before He was born, well, I mean, as a physical person?".

Dmitry paused, sensing a lot might just hang upon his answer.

"Don't know why you are, like, so intense on that point. Maybe you won't agree, but I can only say how it seems to me... truth, and all that. It seems to me Jesus was conceived within Mary. The idea of

Him, the *logos* which John talks about, John 1 and that, was with God from the beginning, but, to me, the whole language of Him being *conceived* within Mary, the holy thing which shall be born of you *shall be called* the Son of God, all those future tenses, the idea of conception, beginning within Mary... no, I don't think He existed before His birth. That," he added with an air of resigned finality, "Is where I stand, I think Luther said, not that I have any time for Luther and Lutherans, you know, it's the Latvians' kinda religion, but he said something like 'This is where I stand on the Bible, and I can do and say no more. But... why is this pre-existence thing, it seems, a big issue for you?'"

Alison grinned. She wanted to hug him but the time and the position of the coffee table wasn't right for that.

"Well, that's exactly what I believe too!"

"But why is that, kinda, such a big thing for you? I mean, if you seriously follow the Bible, I see no other option".

"Well it's just that, I guess, 95% of people who are Christians would reject me because I am not a Trinitarian, and out of those who aren't Trinitarian, well I don't really know the figures, but I'd guess another 80% of them think that Jesus existed as a person before He was born... it's just...just... incredible for me, that sitting here in a cafe in Riga, I meet someone who shares my view, quite independently".

"Marriage made in Heaven and all that, ha", Dmitry quipped, with his trademark half smile. "But OK, let's play the game one step further. Maybe this is the... what do they say in tennis... break point".

With a nervous glint in her eye, Alison was game. "Sure... go ahead".

"Well to be honest a lot of my ideas about the Bible are just what I came to myself, just... reading the Bible, *homus soveticus* reading his Bible down through those years... But to say truthfully, I have been going to a church, well a kinda church, they have no name, it's all very based around some, some sorta British-Russian-Jewish guy, he just explains the Bible twice a week, and, well, there are a lot of *bomzh* who go there, free food and old clothes and stuff, a few other Afghan vets, guys like me who gave up the booze and are still kinda... lost. Well anyway, this guy, he puts a lot of emphasis that Satan isn't, like, a being with horns and that, that fell off the 99th floor. He takes the word as just meaning 'an adversary', anyone or anything that's like opposed, and he keeps saying that we have to take 100% responsibility for our sins, gotta getta grip, no blaming Satan, the real enemy is our own nature, that... *istochnik*... what do you say..."

"Fountain, source... like on bottled mineral water"

"Yes... you walking Russian-English dictionary", he grinned. "But that the real source of sin isn't some guy out there, it's from within. And... I don't know how to say this, Alison. But... it was because of getting that and keeping on thinking about it and working on the idea... that... well you see...". Dmitry's eyes dropped, as Alison's eager eyes pierced him right through and the waitress rolled her eyes from the corner. "You see, I was an alcoholic. It cost me... my marriage... although OK she wasn't a good woman, very pretty and all that, and I was the Red Army officer away a lot and that. Anyway, I was an alcoholic. I think I must've slept by every radiator in the bus station over there in my time. But... it was that idea of Satan that... helped me, really it did. I had kinda come to that understanding anyway in my own way, but... not put it into so many words. It was strange really, at the time Samuel was teaching me all that, I used to go to the library a lot. I read Solzhenitsyn. Our lives here as *bomzh*, really it's a bit like the Gulag archipelago, you know how he plays on how the word 'Gulag', the labour camps, is similar to the word 'gulat', to wander, idea of wandering around an archipelago of camps... well for us *bomzh*, you live in one night shelter for a few months until your time there ends, they only let you stay 90 days out of 365 per year, then you go to another one... and you wander around Riga looking for places that offer free food... Salvation Army on Tuesdays, Samuel's on Monday's, the Bahai's on Friday nights... anyway, I was reading Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, re-reading it, actually, Solzhenitsyn was a guy like me who had seen a lot... of the good

and the bad... and like me, Russian... to the core. The Soviets trashed him, but he was a nationalist, fight for the Russian tricolour rather than the hammer and sickle... that kinda guy... bit like me, well, as I was then, anyway. I know you're not supposed to write in library books, but I underlined a bit in *Gulag* and I made myself memorize it. I once had... a very good memory. I was... trained. I mean, I was in espionage. I can still recite it: "If only it were all so simple! If only... it were necessary only to separate evil people from the rest of us and destroy them! But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Triumphant that he had said his piece about Satan and also correctly remembered the *Gulag* quote, Dmitry paused for breath and dared to lift his eyes. Alison was head down, looking at the coffee mat which had become detached from her cup. Lost for a moment in himself, Dmitry paid no attention to her tear.

"Well it also helped me with... this Latvian-Russian thing. That we cannot just draw a line, throw a lasso around the bad guys and cart them off to a *Gulag*, blame the Latvians, blame the Russians, create another banana republic just for the Russians like they did down there in Moldova, and called it PriDnestrovia, "The Last Republic" and all that. Decide we are right and they are wrong, the good and the bad. Decide we are basically good guys and the problem is Satan and his gang up there, out there, under the table. That line that divides", Dmitry's voice started to quaver, uncharacteristically, "That line that divides, good and pure evil, is within our own hearts. And at times... it's only millimetres thick..."

"You're crying?", Dmitry enquired with a sudden change of tone.

"Has this curious view of mine... disappointed you? Does it... signal some kind of end to...", and his voice trailed away. "To... whatever".

Alison looked up, finally. "This is... you will not believe it. This is just my view". She reached into her bag and pulled out her copy of Anthony Buzzard's latest book against the Trinity. "Look". This guy, he teaches so well about no Trinity, no pre-existence of Jesus. But, he's crazy hard about Satan. I thought to join his church, but I really couldn't after I read that. And I prayed for God to send me someone. Who thought as I did. And when it comes to male-female stuff, the old dears in the church of my youth used to say, a woman should never teach a man... well, they thought a woman couldn't teach a man about anything, not even post natal depression or period pains", she added with some bitterness. "But they used to say, that a woman should marry only a member of the church, "the meeting" they called it, and not "bring them in from outside". So I've never really liked to try to persuade a man of anything when it comes to doctrine. I just... waited and prayed to meet someone, I mean, anyone, who shared how I saw things about God, because really, this is the most important thing to me. Because, well statistics again, but if someone doesn't believe in the Trinity then they are say 5% of Christianity and if on top of that you don't believe in Satan like, like they do, then... you are really a one percenter".

Dmitry didn't permit the whiff of self-admitted romance unduly throw him. But his heart did falter, for a brief second. "Yeah I've always thought of myself as a one percenter, but then I figured, well, living in the shelters, you talk a lot to people, just nothing else to do, and I figure that about everyone thinks they're a one percenter. But yes, I am quite impressed by the fluke of our meeting and how... we are united in these things. I may be a *bomzh* Alison but... there's kinda romantic stuff in some of what you say, ha. But OK, maybe you didn't mean it. I... well, sure, I too prayed for meeting with others, and God kinda heard it in that I met this group where I attend that teach just this".

The two hobby theologians sat in silence for a while, knowing that truly the statistics were very high indeed, the chances of sharing the very same beliefs... They talked for some more, just checking out, as it were, that the other really did share the same views.

"Sometimes I get this feeling, what am I, a guy from Talitsa, Sverdlovskaya Oblast in the Urals of Russia, a little town with the statue of Lenin by the railway station missing a hand, who went through the Afghanistan thing and *so* much else, doing here, in Riga, at this precise moment, in this cafe, with this set of beliefs... you know what I mean?"

"Of course. You can see, surely, I get the same feelings at times. Who am I, a good girl from a south London suburb, doing sitting here in this cafe chain-smoking, believing as I do... with you".

Alison was the one who broke the dreamy silence: "So tell me about your wife, and about this church you go to. And... have you been baptized?"

“Svetlana... well, like I said, she was the beauty queen and I was the Afghan war hero, away for long periods, interviewed in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, two nice kids... Galina, she was really a pretty girl... and Roman, my pride and joy... She took off with a guy, predictably, I suppose”.

“Do you see the children?”

“No. They’re a long way from here”, Dmitry stated abruptly.

“Where?”

“Rhode Island. In the States. Providence, Rhode Island. The guy she took off with was some missionary, some pastor guy, got a big church there”.

“Oh... so, she was religious, like, Christian?”

“Yeah. It was me who got her into it, got her to see that *Pravoslavie*, Russian Orthodoxy, wasn’t the way to go. So she went to some church, you know a lot of them started up after the supposed ‘freedom’ after the *glasnost* nonsense, American missionaries were flying in here like... how do you say... bees to the pot of honey. And... the rest is history, as I think you say, about how good marriages happen. But that was... a divorce made in Heaven”.

There was another of the awkward silences that had come into the conversation after the initial theological meeting of minds.

Dmitry continued: “Providence, Rhode Island. Providence. I often thought that was about right. Providence. But I never quite saw what was the... how to say... providential... providentialness? How do you say?”

“Err... providence... is providence... I guess... it doesn’t decline as a noun, it... stays the same. Must’ve been a word imported into English”.

“OK, thank you”, Dmitry curtly responded. “Well I never saw the providence in it all. Yes, imported words don’t decline, I think, in many languages. Like in Russian... now we even have “*praysleest*”, price list, as an official word. The old *babushkas* out in *Talitsa* where I was from...”. Dmitry’s voice faded somewhat and his eyes had the thousand mile focus. “They, they wouldn’t know what those kind of new words in Russian mean”.

The conversation sputtered and splattered, in fits and starts. Alison noticed Ilze walking passed the window, and imagined Ilze might even have caught sight of them. She so wished Dmitry would get to the point.

Dmitry wasn’t really one for small talk. “You know our word, *pustoslovit*, to talk empty words. Think we’ve been doing it rather a lot the last 10 minutes. To cut to the point. My former wife and family is one thing. Sure, it explains why I am kinda anti-church, don’t trust churches, organizations. The question you asked about baptism is the real thing”.

They caught each other’s eye for a long moment.

“You see, I should be baptized”, Dmitry stated slowly, and then dropped his eyes from hers. “The guy at the place I go, he is always nudging me about it. But I don’t trust him. He’s very... odd. Unusual. He doesn’t fit any... any matrix of personality I ever studied. He says he works with asylum seekers. They pay to get to Europe and are dropped in boats in the Baltic, then they get to shore in Western Latvia and are taken to some centre in *Olaine*. It’s just south of *Riga*. This guy, *Samuel*, he says he goes there and preaches to them. He baptizes them, and there’s always a group of them at the back of the church. They are mainly Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis. And... well, I am an Afghan vet. And... I murdered men there. This guy, this pastor guy, well he doesn’t like being called that, but he kinda is, that’s what he is really, he says he goes away in the week to baptize people, help people, in Afghanistan, all over the world, then he gets back in time for the weekend meetings at the church here in *Riga*. I have to say I am very suspicious of him. He seems to belong to no church, the hall we meet in, he has put no sign up on it, he always says “we’re just Bible Christians” when he’s asked, he’s always very... furtive, is the word... very nervous, odd body language, when the issue is raised. When people are odd about their identity, there’s always another story there. He hangs out with those Afghan guys socially. I’ve seen him here in the city centre with them”.

“I see. So you doubt him, and don’t want him to baptize you. Fair enough. Is he... like, married and that?”

“Yes. Sweet, naive girl from Canada. Quite smart, I’d say, academically. I think she’s a doctor, or trained as one. Two kids. Very caring, pastor’s wife type. Speaks Russian OK but... lots of mistakes. I think she has no clue who or what her husband really is, just keeps her head down and gets on with being a Christian and the good wife and mum. There’s a lot of women like that. I have no doubts about her really. It’s him”.

Dmitry explained to Alison where the church met, how to get there. For the first time, he kissed her hand as they parted, having set up yet another coffee meeting.

“And one last question, Dmitry. What are those marks on your right cheek? It looks like... you were in a fight...?”.

“I was... beaten last night, yes. I can’t figure whatever the motive was. But... it happens. To people like me”.

Alison imagined how he might’ve looked after fights in Afghanistan. He was a rugged beauty alright. Not like Alan, with his endless aftershave and always buying new types of razors for his sensitive skin.

She tapped in the code on her apartment block door and entered, checking her mail box on the first floor on autopilot. A piece of school exercise book paper was stuffed in her box. A message was written, “Hello Mrs. Alison. Nice to know you are here”. She noted that it was written as someone accustomed to writing in Cyrillic writes English, the letters formed in an almost childlike way.

CHAPTER 4

Running for the Door

It wasn't difficult to find the place Dmitry had described. The number five tram stopped the other side of Nordeki Park, and it was a 10 minute walk through the snow bound field, past the forlorn, iced-up and broken swings and rickety slide, over Dzirciema Iela, and to the single storey building that housed the church Dmitry had spoken about. In fact it was almost walking distance from her place. The journalist in Alison couldn't but think about the accounts of Afghan veterans, ex Red Army officers, people with stories, who would be there. And the mysterious Samuel whom Dmitry clearly had some hang-ups with. And... people who apparently believed as she did about Bible doctrine, about Jesus. Her years involved with Christadelphian evangelism had made her cynical about people who appeared to believe "the truth as we do". It usually transpired they agreed on some points but not on others, and were usually connected however obtusely to some established denomination. But the human interest side of the thing was a positive expectation. And... who knows. Maybe... her prayers for a partner might be answered but not quite in the form of Dmitry. Someone who at least wasn't a *bomzh*. She had a close shave with Ilze and her latest friend in the park. Strange Ilze should be this side of town, maybe her new girlfriend lived there. Up early for a walk together on Sunday morning in the park... each to her own.

Just as Dmitry had said, there was no sign on the building. She'd arranged with Dmitry that they'd act like they didn't know each other, in case he got hassle from the other guys about his friendship with a Western woman. The door was opened for her by a guy with "Dezhurny" on a poorly made badge on his sweater. A karaoke was playing on a screen at one end of the hall, some Russian Christian song with the words flashing up on the screen. Alison's journalistic eye took it all in. Nice carpet, mirrors all around the hall, power sockets every half meter. Clearly an ex casino. About 50 people were already seated, and another 30 or so were milling around an urn with coffee in it. Clearly lower class, the types who lived in the shelters. And very... Russian. Boxes of clothes being rummaged through by some women. Cigarette smoke coming in through the fire escape, with men walking in and out of the door often enough to allow a steady draught to come into the otherwise warm building. More men than women. All seemed to know each other, high level of quiet conversation. Some reading Bibles, some other books, some the free "5 Minutes" newspapers you could get at the tram termini. Two young children running around, and a smiling mother going around talking to people, the children attracting lots of smiles and nice comments from those present. A large display of books with a handwritten sign up offering free literature and New Testaments. An overall... happy feel. Two rows of chairs set back from the body of the other chairs, with some Africans and Middle Eastern types sitting there talking to each other in English or in their own languages. Everyone in dark sweaters or jackets, the usual Winter uniform. Dmitry was in a knot of men by the coffee urn. A man in jeans and sweater sidled over to Alison and welcomed her.

"Not seen you here before, welcome", he said, without undue enthusiasm. "How did you hear about our meetings, or did you, like, just walk in off the street?"

"I... heard about you and thought I'd drop by and see what it's all about".

"Sure. Want a coffee?"

"I'm... fine, thanks", Alison replied, having noticed Dmitry standing near the coffee. "So what makes you different from other churches round here?"

The man shrugged and caught her eye. "We had a lot of grief with churches, so, we just decided to read the Bible with people and honestly try to explain what it means, we focus on Jesus, on grace, on baptizing people into Jesus, and giving them the hope of eternal life in God's Kingdom when Jesus

returns. And we try to help people... feed them, give them a bit of relevant help, teach them the Bible and... well, the comfort of God's love. I guess that's what you've heard all churches say?"

"Well yes, I've been around quite a few. Not found what I'm looking for I guess. But you say "we", who's the "we"?"

The man smiled. "My wife and I. That's about it. Nice question. Do you prefer to speak Latvian? Or... maybe some other language? I'm afraid we do the meetings just in Russian here, and English for our, our other visitors" he said, motioning to the seats at the back of the hall.

Alison's ego took a slight tumble as she realized yet again that her Russian was so flawed, and that she had taken this man as a Russian when he too had another first language. Well, the guy knew she wasn't Russian... And so this was the legendary Samuel. So, might as well own up to being British: "Oh I'm British... English is fine".

He raised his eyes rather charmingly and smiled slightly: "Well I must say, your Russian's not bad at all. Just... watch your cases, and pronunciation, well, that's a lifetime's work. So, what brings you here to Riga?"

"Oh, work and, general interest. But I've come along here to you today because I heard you're not Trinitarian, and that you believe a lot of things I do. What are the bottom line points you teach here? What's your denomination?"

"I don't really teach theology as such. Just read the Bible with these folks and feed them, try to make it real for them, feed them, give them clothing, baptize them. But yeah you're right, I'm not Trinitarian, I teach against it, and that Jesus began just inside Mary, didn't personally exist in Heaven beforehand and, you know, come floating down from Heaven on a cloud. Kingdom on earth, resurrection of the body, conditional immortality, and about satan.."

Alison cut in: "So you don't believe in the pre-existence?"

"Of Jesus? No, I don't. You must be some kinda theology student to know or care about that!"

"So, you're, kinda Christadelphian? Have you heard of them?"

"Yeah sure, I know them, and yes, you could say theologically I am a Christadelphian, basically we teach the same stuff, just, different emphasis in practice".

The man seemed possibly uncomfortable. He had a way of slightly lowering his head and talking to you whilst looking through the top of his glasses, creating the impression of eye contact when it wasn't quite that. He called out to his wife, who came over and engaged Alison in conversation in English whilst he moved on to chat with a partially sighted *babushka* who had just entered the hall.

The meeting started after about 100 people had taken their seats. Alison sat at the back, Dmitry toward the front. Samuel gave a simple opening prayer and asked who wanted to read the day's chapters. There were about four volunteers, and Samuel chose a middle aged woman, who limped badly as she walked to the front to read. She read a chapter from Genesis, about Jacob. Samuel launched off into a half hour explanation of the chapter. He spoke firstly in Russian, then in English, sentence by sentence. Alison noted he seemed far more confident in Russian than in English, and that he had a distinct accent and occasional grammatical mistakes when he spoke in English. His talk seemed to be an appeal to see God's hand in human life, lots of practical challenge, good mix of encouragement for sinners too, and every now and again he would make some theological point, reminding the audience that Jacob was dead and had no immortal soul but would be resurrected at Christ's return, commenting that Jacob was a "prototype" of Jesus but reminding everyone that Jesus didn't exist at that time.

There was then a time for personal testimony. Pretty interesting. One young guy stripped off his jacket, then sweater and shirt, to reveal how he had “666” tattooed on his neck; but he wanted to turn away from Satanism and be baptized into Jesus, put his neck under the yoke of Christ and not Satan, who, he said, he now no longer believed even existed. A respectful cheer went up from the group when he said he wanted to be baptized. Dmitry looked rather awkward at that point. Seemed he didn’t cheer nor clap, just looked at the carpet.

There was a break, and then prayer requests from the audience, which Samuel wrote down on a piece of paper. For work, accommodation, a range of health issues, and for various other people and relatives, for the spread of the Gospel, for the return of Christ. He asked for prayer for his own upcoming trip later that week. Someone near to Alison asked his neighbour “Where to this time?”. “Out there, you know, Middle East somewhere” was the grunted response. There was then more personal testimony. One of the Afghans came to the front. He had a large birth mark on his right cheek, and he limped slightly. In broken English, he explained how he had been given clearance to remain in Latvia, and how grateful he was to God and Samuel, that he didn’t have to return to Afghanistan. He eulogized Samuel rather too long, with Samuel looking increasingly awkward as he had to translate the testimony into Russian. Those in the audience who knew both languages were smiling somewhat as Samuel fumbled the eulogy about himself in English into more general terms in Russian. But Alison’s eyes were fixed on Dmitry. He was shaking, just slightly, but shaking. He had his head right down and his right hand well covering his face. Was this how far bad conscience about being unbaptized leads a man? Was it all a follow on from the cheer that had gone up when the ex-Satanist said he wanted to be baptized? He was looking down at the carpet in the same way. Was Dmitry actually... sober?

The service went on, climaxing in the breaking of bread service. Straight afterwards, soup was brought out and the audience turned into long snaking lines waiting to get to the soup, strictly ladled out by two of the congregation with the pastor’s wife and children walking up and down the lines chatting to people. Alison went over to the young Afghan guy to get into conversation about the realities of asylum seeking in Latvia. They stood together by the main entrance, chatting. There was then a commotion around the fire escape. Someone... Dmitry... was pushing through the crowd of people holding soup bowls, and forcing the fire escape door open. It usually remained shut during meal times because people were lining up across it. There was quite some outcry at him. “Why ever?!... whatever the rush?... can’t you be patient for a smoke... why push Ninochka like that?”. The fire door slammed, and Dmitry was gone. Alison was confused and shocked. She opened the main entrance door in time to see him running, very fast, across the side street and disappearing up an alley. So fast and straight that he clearly wasn’t drunk.

An hour later, an SMS arrived from Dmitry. “Be careful. Very very careful. Goodbye”. Typical Russian dramatism, Alison mused, thinking how Ilze used to talk about that with such a disdainful voice. What was it? Bad conscience about his need for baptism? Hate of Afghans because of his war experiences there? A way of breaking off with her...? Jealous because she had talked with the Afghan guy? That certainly seemed to have been the breaking point for him. Although... he’d been obviously stressed throughout the whole meeting at church. Maybe he really was the old school, if you’re his woman you simply can’t talk with another man. But... he surely wasn’t that primitive. But men... are really odd when it comes to fearing losing a woman. Or maybe he just figured that he and I could never be an item... a bridge too far, and maybe the church meeting, me seeing him together with the other *bomzh*, just made him realize that. A ripple of pessimism swept through Alison as she re-read the text. There seemed no process of ending, no possible way forward. All very sudden. Too sudden. But maybe God had just used this guy to bring her to a church which amazingly, against all odds, was *exactly* what she’d been looking for. God was in this, for sure. And the pastor guy. Sure, enigmatic, shifty, “Jewish as”, as Dmitry used to say. But surely, not that bad a bloke, as Dmitry seemed to think. Russians and their conspiracy theories... result of the system. Well who knows... maybe... through him, that pastor guy... maybe he has a brother... or a brother in law... a friend... who... believes as we do, and all that. Or nearly, anyway. But all the same, Dmitry... Dmitry... Dima... “Dimchik, I would’ve ended up calling you” she muttered to herself.

CHAPTER 5

The Hitman

Monday evening blues. Alison wrote up her blog, but very non-specifically. The loneliness of ex-pat workers, Part 3... all sounded well and good, but how can you really share your fears, your wonderings, your fear you are falling in love. With a *bomzh*. And the pain of fearing you've lost him. By eight in the evening, Alison was feeling hungry. *Really* hungry. She hadn't smoked all day. The usual thing was to go out and buy another packet from the kiosk outside Rimi, or to go into Rimi and buy some frozen food, or grab something from the CanCan Pizza outlet. Or sometimes, do both. But there were forces of fear on one hand and spiritual ambition on the other working furiously in her confused mind. She felt inspired to really quit smoking. She never bought more than one packet at a time. Never had more than one lighter at a time. She took her lighter from her handbag and stood at the open window where she usually smoked from. She prayed, but Mark Twain's words kept interfering with her prayer, that it's so easy to quit smoking, I've done it many times. Apologizing to God for mind wandering in prayer, she threw the lighter out of the window onto the snow covered grass below, half praying for forgiveness for being a litter bug.

And now... to the shops. Food. There was hardly anything in the fridge. But... that note. It was dark, only one streetlight worked the entire length of her block. The fear which arises from loneliness was strong. Alison booted up her desktop, noticing that her hands were slightly shaking. Her PhD thesis on the Russian minority in the urban Baltics and their perceptions of the Afghanistan conflict was making steady progress. She had eased into her work, pleased that she was mastering the craving for nicotine, when the doorbell rang.

Fear gripped her. "Please, *please*, please, help me, loving Father in Heaven... in Jesus Name Amen". She went to the door and looked through the spy hole, which gave excellent coverage of the landing outside the door. A man stood there. He spoke in fair English, with a typical Latvian accent, stressing the first syllables of each word.

"Is that Alison? Don't worry, no need to open the door, it's not safe around here, I do understand, just want to give you a message".

Alison in a split second breathed a prayer of thanks to God that she didn't have to open the door. And in another split second, the linguist in her for some reason mused that this guy was very very Latvian. The emphasis on the first syllable of words which there is in Latvian makes the language very melodic, and Latvians always have difficulty in mastering the pronunciation of other languages because of this.

"Yes it's Alison here, go ahead".

"Do you see this?". The man opened his overcoat to reveal something in the inside pocket which was held by half his hand. "It's a safety catch. If I flick it like this... it means the safety catch is now off". The click of the pistol's catch struck into Alison's deepest heart. "I'll put it back for now, it's now... on. Just saying, we know where you live. Do have a good evening".

He scampered down the stairs, and she heard the outside door clang shut. He must've known the entry code from somewhere. She fought back wave after wave of panic, motivated by thinking her mother would've just screamed and screamed, that her sister thought it was wrong for "a woman" to be alone in Eastern Europe, how Alan had despised her as emotional and hot-headed and in need of a man. There seemed nobody to turn to. Clearly enough, this was something to do with Dmitry. But... he really... knew God. Knew the Bible, "knew the Truth" as they used to say back home. But Alan... her

father... so many others, had “known the Truth” and it did them no good at all in moral terms. But... why? Why would that Dmitry play these games. Sure she’d caught him glancing at her breasts a couple of times. And sure, she’d not exactly discouraged the guy. He was clever. She was clever. But she knew that he was more clever than her. This was all some kind of psychological game. “Putting the wind up me so I will become totally dependent upon him” was how she had explained to the online counsellor what Alan had done to her. She sighed a sigh of 20% relief, realizing what was likely going on. But all the same... this guy was in with people who had guns and weren’t afraid to use them. And he was after all a murderer. A murderer. Who said he’d killed in cold blood. Surely once you did that... the conscience was brutalized. They do it again, like a dog who’s tasted blood. Forgiveness... restoration... psychological miracles... OK they do happen, can’t deny it. But with Dmitry, with anyone, actually... how to tell? And how to trust it has? But... he had figured out no personal Satan, Kingdom of God coming on earth, no trinity, Jesus as Son of God but also human, our representative, not personally pre-existing... that was all an amazing fluke of coincidence that he could figure out all those things. And... no, he wasn’t just guessing what she would want him to say, and saying it. He had it all backed up from his own Bible reading... But then, theology won’t save anyone. So dear Jim Proctor used to say. Before they kicked him out. Indeed the more you know of it, the more it can lead you to behave in a really bad way... Jim was *so* right. And Dmitry... knew it all, but hadn’t been baptized, he said. So... it was just head knowledge.

Alison wanted as never in her life to smoke. But the 200 meter walk to the 24 hour kiosk was out of the question given what had happened. Call the Police? And what would they do. Check out Dmitry. And if Dmitry was innocent... they’d... lock him up, they just hated those kind of night shelter Russians. And she’d heard enough stories of expatriate women going to the Police with some problem and then being intimidated by the Police themselves and their friends. Ilze had told her of awful problems with some of her lesbian friends who’d had problems, the Police had really given them an unbelievably hard time, and those stories seemed to Alison to have the ring of truth about them. And other bad associations of the corrupt Police force started to flood her mind... Ilze had had her car stolen, she said she suspected she knew who did it, told the Police, and the Police had hassled her like mad, every day she had had stories about the hassling for a week or so.

So there was prayer. Nothing else. No Police, no friends, only God. “Whom have I in Heaven... or on earth... but You”. Family back in England who had told her “good riddance”, told her they cried tears that she’d be thrown into the lake of fire at Christ’s return and therefore they couldn’t associate with her until she had repented... There’d be no loving welcome or sympathetic words at the end of that phone line if she called mum or dad. So there was only God. She prayed but couldn’t find the words she wished for. She thought of how Jim used to talk about “the spirit”, praying in the spirit, just letting the thoughts, feelings and situations flow to God, without needing to verbalize them... but she kept getting distracted from doing just that by the memory of her father screaming “He’s unsound... unsound... unsound on the Holy Spirit...”, and her mother piously saying that if Jim was going to continue attending “the meeting”, her “conscience would no longer permit me to attend”. Even in this desperate moment, those memories flooded back. After two hours of trying to pray, interspersed with trying to remember everything that had happened with Dmitry, Alison was feeling stronger. It was all of course something to do with him. She started to even feel angry with him. “10:38” read her mobile phone in the darkness- for some reason, she’d switched all the lights off. She flicked down her saved numbers to “Dmitry Bomzh” and pressed “call”.

“Hi”, he whispered in Russian. “Call me back in 1 or 2 minutes. I’ll just go to the toilet”.

“Why the whispering?” Alison confidently said. But he had hung up. She’d never called him so late in the evening. And why, she wondered, was he speaking Russian when he usually spoke English with her? Was he a real schizophrenic, a psychopath, with all the brains that go with it? Maybe he really was the typical sort who end up in social care, totally crazy, very clever, half what they say has some basis in reality, sure he probably had been in Afghanistan, probably had been married, but half of it is wild fantasy. But... the Biblical stuff. That, admittedly, was hard. But... sure, an intelligent man, a highly intelligent man, a brilliant mind engaged with the Bible, and those crazies often are kinda religious... yeah, he could’ve figured it all out. And... he can’t talk right now because he has to urinate

or something? He must be drunk. He was clearly not who he had made out to be. So she decided not to call him back.

Thinking about sleep, her phone rang. It was a missed call from Dmitry. She prayed, but had already really decided to return the call. A strange confidence was in her voice:

“Hello Dmitry, what’s all this whispering, need to go urinate, talking to me in Russian, call me back stuff? Don’t play games with me. OK?”

Dmitry’s voice quavered. “Oh Alison... don’t... say it like that. I was whispering because here in the shelter tonight it was lights out at 10 and silence after 10:30. There are 12 men in the room where I sleep, most of them are already asleep, so I had my phone on silent but I saw it was you so I answered it, and I’ve slipped out to the toilet to talk. And... I spoke in Russian because... well... if I spoke in English late at night to someone with others here listening, it’d, well, make a big problem”. Dmitry wanted to say to the effect that it’d make the problem worse. But that sweet naive Alison didn’t know his problems.

Struggling with the utter and unexpected credibility of what she had just heard, Alison’s confidence and game plan was somewhat dented. “OK... well if that’s the case... it may well be... then, sure Dmitry, I am sorry. Anyway, I am calling you about that incident tonight. You know what I’m referring to”.

“Sorry Alison, what did you say? What incident tonight, is that really what you said, an incident tonight?”, Dmitry whispered, now in Russian.

Alison heard a toilet flushing in the background and a man clearing his throat and spitting.

“Yes, that’s what I said. Just don’t play games with *me*. I am not quite so dumb as people might think. So Dmitry, I’d like to meet you tomorrow, around 14:00 please wait at the Laima clock by Freedom Monument, opposite McDonalds. I’ll call you and tell you where to meet. I’ll... I’ll have company. Is that agreeable?”.

It sounded like Dmitry might be sobbing.

“Yes. Yes. You can ask me anything, and I’ll do it. I... don’t know why you are being like this... I...err... well, I love you. I will be waiting there where you say. And, well, whatever it is, please, be gentle with me. You know, I’m a brother, brother in Christ, OK OK I know, I’m not baptized, yet, but, I mean, I am a believer”.

The “I love you” was a first, and was freighted with huge significance for Alison, especially after their last meeting. Fighting back the tug at her heart, she kept up her business like confidence: “OK, I can hear it may not be that convenient for you to talk, “It’s not that safe around here” as they say, so 14:00 tomorrow then, and...”. Alison paused to ensure she was accurately remembering the man’s parting words to her from the landing as he put the pistol back in his inside pocket. “And, as they say, do have a good evening”.

Dmitry looked at his phone with incomprehension. The beep-beep-beep of the now disconnected call just slightly echoed in the toilet cubicle. There were stumbling, slightly shuffling footsteps at the washroom entrance. No good pretending he wasn’t there. Fortunately it was only Igor. He’d somehow got through the alcohol breath check at the shelter entrance, but he was “warm”. Stumbling in the darkness to the toilet. He seemed to pay no attention to Dmitry as he did his small business, cursing the dim light, Latvia, Latvians, the state of the nation, and about everything his fumbling hands came across.

CHAPTER 6

The Brothers Karamazov

It's still dark at 8 a.m. in the Baltic Winter. Throwing out time at the *priut* was a depressive, even angry ten minutes. Whether or not Pugachova had been topless last night in St. Petersburg wasn't in anyone's mind any more. The men filed out under Skaidrite's watchful eye. They couldn't leave anything at the shelter, so each had their Maxima or Rimi or Super Netto shopping bag with a few possessions in. Coats and jackets had to be open and searchable on exit, in case someone had tried to steal anything. There was nothing much of any small size in the shelter which could be stolen. Assaulted by the cold air on Maskavas street, the men buttoned or zipped up their jackets. A few curses of broken zips and missing buttons. And Skaidrite now didn't have to remind them to "move well away from the door now, and don't start lining up until 7:45 tonight at the earliest". But men who had PhDs and had once had a good life seethed with anger in that early morning, silent street. They were down but not out. There was plenty of fight left in them. But they knew it was just useless to project it against the system, against Skaidrite, against the *sotsialka* system of Latvia. The whole scene, so far as they were concerned, had come about from betrayal, from the West, from those of their own who had sided with the West for their own benefit. Men who knew little about the Gospels knew who Judas was, and they used that term, generously embedded within the wide range of expletives which there is in the Russian language. There was some wasteland near the shelter, derelict sheds where you could sleep if for some reason they didn't let you in to the shelter one evening. Six men dragged Dmitry into one of the sheds. His protestations were met with expletives and a mention of *Judas*, but no engagement with anything he said.

Only ten minutes later the men emerged and sauntered off down Maskavas. Igor was leaning against a wall near the tram stop, and they stopped and had a few words with him before continuing their way. Igor then walked off in the other direction, and was out of sight by the time Dmitry stumbled out of the shed and limped back towards the shelter. His eye was for sure going to turn black, blood was on his jeans and shirt collar, but it wiped off his jacket quite well. And Alison... 14:00. Probably just to say goodbye. Four hours to clean up. But you can't clean up a black eye. Not a single Santim either. Public toilets were all 20 Santims. He hovered at the door of the shelter. There was the buzzer. With the neatly written notice in Latvian stating that it must not be pressed, for *any* reason, between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. *Ne spiediet*. How cold and harsh the Latvian letters sounded to him. Do not. So it was Maxima supermarket, the toilets. Maybe the invalid toilets. Although with blood and looking like he was drunk, it'd be minutes if not seconds before he was thrown out. The woman who seemed to keep an eye on the washrooms was quite forward in opening them from the outside if she thought a *bomzh* was inside. No, the shelter wasn't going to open to him. Not for anything. Dmitry looked in the window and tried to discern how damaged he really was. Not good at all. Really needed stitches. Doctor visits had to be paid for, and he had no p.k. anyway. And literally not a penny. Maybe... try to return to Talitsa? Through the forests on the Belarusian border, that was the way to do it, into Belarus, somehow to Talitsa. But it'd need money. And what was there in Talitsa? A few old friends from way back, possibly. The statue of Lenin opposite the railway station. The kiosks lining the square, all selling the same thing. The *Univermag* supermarket he had roamed with wondrous eyes as a child... probably now half empty, maybe derelict, or split up into small shops selling clothes. And... no documents. Nothing to prove anything. Mum... mum. *Mama*. Sweet *mamochka*. Whose funeral he had missed. Could tend her grave and... die there. "Bury me next to my mother and my father", didn't some old guy in the Bible say somewhere in the Old Testament. At least, bury me in my Russia. No immortal soul, just back to dust, so a Russian guy should go back to the dust of Russia... *vai ne?* as those Latvians say at the end of so many of their sentences, "is it not so?".

As he neared the city centre, a wild thought occurred to Dmitry. Take a coffee cup and beg for a bit. Get up to 50 Santims or maybe one Lat, and go to the *tochka*. The old woman there sold *krootka*, home brewed vodka, for one Lat. Then, go to sleep it off in the railway station... sober up by 7:30 in

the evening and back to the shelter. The guys likely wouldn't strike again at least not twice in the same day. Stuff Alison and 14:00 and coffee. Sending texts like that. Who wants to hear a woman who's hopelessly out of your reach saying "goodbye" with all her British pride and stiff arrogance. That phone call, after all... why the arrogance and hard attitude. Western pride and superiority. "Knowing my station and my place" didn't that Rick Wakeman sing. And now... is my station the railway station? *Really?* I who... once drove a brand new Volga? I who... figured out... some sort of... the Bible? Dmitry felt for his Bible and was surprised it was still in his jacket, which they had rifled through. And even more surprisingly, his cell phone was wedged in between the pages of it. They must've missed it. Grace. Yes, that was grace. Although, humanly speaking, it was... suspicious, to say the least, that they were out simply to hurt and beat him rather than to get anything material out of him. He opened the Bible at random. It predictably fell open about in the middle, in Isaiah. "Truly you are a God that hides Yourself, O God of Israel, the Saviour". Another grace, because that felt so relevant. "Grace upon grace", didn't it say in John's Gospel somewhere. The Bible not taken, nor his phone. And then that verse. No. Penniless maybe, but no. No drinking. No *tochka*. Grace upon grace. Dmitry begged for a bit. Looking so beat up hardly helped. People threw in as little as 2 Santims. It took a while to get up to 20. And quite a time too for the old lady at the turnstile to the public toilet to count up Dmitry's offering and give him his piece of toilet paper before opening the turnstile, with the bitter comment "And no washing of *feet*. And no loitering. In and out. Go through". There might just possibly have been in the last two words a faint ray of respect, that this *bomzh* had actually got together 20 Santims and was paying to use a public toilet rather than quietly urinating somewhere.

There was time to kill until 14:00. There were no other *bomzh* known to Dmitry in the waiting room. Apart from Igor, reading an old newspaper in one corner. He was the last person to try to cadge a smoke from. And Dmitry didn't really fancy a half hour of meaningless chatter with Igor. But the urge to smoke was strong, and gathering up butts was somewhat beneath Dmitry today. Even though the railway station entrance was really not a bad place; and the platforms were even better. People in a rush dropped their cigarettes only half smoked. So, Igor it was.

"Ah, Dima, son. Not looking too good, ha. The boys, I heard, settled up with you this morning, so I heard. Looks like they... went a bit far, ha". Igor seemed somewhat nervous and reserved.

"Yes, dunno why though. Really... I do *not* know why". After all, Igor was the only person Dmitry had talked to so far that day. And the "why?" question was so strong, it had to be stated, even to earth's dumbest fool.

"Why... why. Well son, life. Life is life". Igor seemed to avoid Dmitry's gaze, and his usual habit of eyeballing was strangely restrained.

"Anyway Igor, hard times. Do you have a smoke?"

With uncharacteristic speed, Igor eagerly obliged, somewhat awkward that he actually had a packet of cigarettes rather than some tobacco in a tin.

"*Prima*. 99 Santims. Only fags you can get for less than a Lat now, you know. They say we have to be prepared for hard times coming in Latvia, word on the street is that fags and booze are gonna be taxed, you know, *taxed*, and prices are gonna go up".

"Taxed *more*, yes, I wouldn't be surprised. Anyway thanks Igor. See you tonight".

"You know me son. Any time. If I've got it, I'll give it. That's me".

Dmitry decided not to respond to that, and slipped away.

Meanwhile, Alison eyed Ilze from the other side of the open plan office. She so wanted someone to talk to, to share what had happened. But Ilze... no. She'd hype the thing up... although, it was after all a pretty big thing, to be threatened with a gun, to have your address known by a gunman. Alison thought better of talking to Ilze, and instead scanned the newspaper for apartments for rent. And

scribbled out in Russian her prepared statement for Dmitry. If he turned up. If she died for it, she was going to tell him it straight. Shoot her before or after it, all the same. They... whoever *they* were... could find these little notes. That "I am a Christian, a woman of principle, should never be treated like this, made myself vulnerable enough to love, and was used. Was misunderstood. Didn't go to the Police, they are a safety net at least where I come from, in a normal, decent country like England; but now I shall stand alone and be myself, stand with God, as His child, because there is no Police protection for me here, of that I am sure. Dmitry you know the Truth, knowledge makes responsible to judgment, you will be judged for how you have behaved, God help you, better is expected of you, you of all people shouldn't be threatening or conspiring to murder, my blood shall be upon you and you will have to give account to God at the last day. All your theology may've just been a hobby for you but this is the one hobby which makes you responsible to God". With the momentary enthusiasm which comes from having an idea which commends itself instantly as good sense, Alison decided to write out her scribbles as a full statement. For sure, Dmitry wouldn't turn up. But he lived in the *priut* on Maskavas. She could wait for him there when they all lined up outside, and give it to him then. Somehow, find him, and give him her statement. And then... shift to Moscow? Back to England, just, not to London? Whatever. But first, today had to be faced. Tomorrows have enough evil of their own. So Jesus said. She wrote out her statement to Dmitry and carefully placed it in her pocket.

Alison thought through the implications of the fact that she had set herself up of her own volition to meet Dmitry, her possible murderer. Because for sure, he must've been behind the threat on her life made... not even 24 hours ago. Alison took another piece of paper and began to write a poem. "I never knew I was so brave" was the idea. But somehow the words didn't merge with her feelings. She eventually screwed up that piece of paper, had some passing chatter with Ilze, wondering if she'd ever see her again if she was in fact going to get a bullet at the Laima clock at 14:00. Or thereabouts.

CHAPTER 7

The Laima Clock

Dmitry was at the clock first. Alison watched him from a distance first. Nothing seemed suspicious. But then, it wouldn't. He was an espionage guy. It would all be done cleanly and professionally, and on Sunday she'd seen him run, very fast and very straight. He had a fair chance of getting away. Although likely he'd have another guy set up to pull a trigger from somewhere. But the pedestrian square on the Riga railway station concourse is huge and thronged with people. To shoot someone in the middle of it and run away through all those people was... not going to be easy for him, or for his accomplice. Alison prayed as she stood next to a kiosk. One of those prayers where you know not what to pray for, the obvious thing to pray for- safety, in this case- somehow you don't pray for. You mutter and ramble. But didn't Jim say that time, at that fraternal where Rowan had punched dad over that argument about fellowshipping Dawn, that that's OK, even Paul said we know not what to pray for as we ought and the Greek means "we know not *how* to pray", but the Spirit makes intercession, and they all raved afterwards that this was heresy.

"Put your best foot forward, girl". So dad had said when she stepped up for the 100 meter race that school sports day. Dad... what would *he* think. Alison shot dead in Russia. He still called Latvia "Russia". And she'd not come back to the Truth, so sad. Punished for her sins. "Who knows whether God will be gracious, but in faithfulness to His word we cannot hold out any real hope for such a person at the day of judgment, we cannot ourselves judge beyond His word". They'd said it enough times over enough other premature deaths of those who'd "left", in mock humility... or maybe, in their twisted way, it was indeed just them being humble, within the limits of their... understanding... their *mis*understanding. And so Alison strode purposefully toward Dmitry. She had a dark red overcoat. White scarf. Wondering how the blood would show up on those two items of clothing.

"Hello Dmitry".

His appearance fazed her for a moment. Fresh black eye, torn jacket. He'd obviously put this on, nice job, something unusual to grab her attention. So this was it, with me fazed and taken aback, then the strike will come.

"I'm so sorry for how I look. I had some problems this morning. Some guys beat me. For absolutely no reason".

"Yes yes", Alison responded, well aware of the intention she perceived to faze her.

"Look, I don't know why you are as you are with me. I... am a sincere man".

Looking him up and down, Alison had to admit that if this was a put up, it had been very enthusiastically done. He really *had* been badly beaten up. Rather an elaborate plot to coax her to trust him and to her death by a bullet. His voice was quavering. And what if... she was wrong.

"Sincere or not, I have something to say to you. But... look, it's cold here in the middle of the square. Would you like to sit with me and hear what I have to say in that cafe by the international ticket office?". It was hard to keep up the image of anger and putting a beaten man in his place.

"If you're going to talk like that... maybe not", Dmitry replied, swallowing back pain and hurt pride. "Anyway, I have not a single Santim. Not a penny".

"That's OK".

The fact it was nearly always like that at their meetings for coffee was left unspoken by the brief silence.

“So, let’s go”, the self-doubting Alison snapped, realizing her hard front was probably going to have to collapse.

They walked in silence across half of the square to the station entrance and to the cafe. Alison slipped on the ice and Dmitry fumbled, not knowing whether to reach out a steadying hand or not. Every step of the way, Dmitry had the thought of running. Running... anywhere. Although he’d have no chance, running on sheet ice.

They finally reached the coffee bar. Alison made sure to open the door for herself, strode to the bar and ordered. The usual. She seemed to spin out taking off her coat, scarf and hat. For now... the talking must start.

“Well, what do you have to say, I mean, “what’s up”, as I think they say in American English”. Alison hadn’t imagined Dmitry taking the initiative. Her prepared statement was in her coat pocket and somehow irrelevant.

“Something’s obviously happened with *you*, hasn’t it. I’m really sorry for how you’ve been beaten up. Really I am so sorry. I don’t know why and who was guilty or whatever but the damage is done all the same”. Alison knew that was a poor opening encounter, but it wasn’t a game to win, rather a truth to be told.

“OK I will have my say first then. What happened to me this morning was quite simple. I was grabbed by a group of Russian guys, dragged into one of the sheds on that wasteland opposite the shelter, and they did me. Real bad. And I have no real idea why they did it. It was like they had to settle a score. But what score, and why with them, I don’t know. I have seen a couple of the guys around, they are pretty well *bomzh* as well. But why the anger, I don’t know. God was good, it could’ve been far worse, and they didn’t take my Bible nor, strangely enough, my phone. They more wanted to hurt *me*. That is what was so weird”.

Alison shook her head. To be or not to be... honest, trusting. Or to pack her laptop and few personal things and get a cab to the airport and buy a ticket back to London. She could be back there in Gatwick airport in... well, maybe by late evening. There’s now an evening flight most days.

“Weird’s the word. Perhaps. Look Dmitry, I dunno... if you are sincere”.

Dmitry’s face fell yet more. A nanosecond of male body language persuaded Alison.

“I mean, I’m not saying you’re not. I don’t know, like, you don’t know if I am either. Yesterday after church I had a very bad experience. I have someone threatening to take my life, to shoot me. They know where I live. I could’ve just run away, but I care for you enough not to do so. To just tell you, that the most important thing for you and me is to be in God’s Kingdom, you’re responsible, and if you are involved in this stuff, I mean, don’t wanna scare you or anything, but, we are talking eternal life and death. The ultimate issues. That’s why I didn’t freak out and run to the Police or jump on... a bus down to Vilnius or a plane to London. Or Moscow”.

“So what happened, exactly?”, Dmitry probed. Alison explained factually, speaking slowly.

Finally Dmitry confidently eyeballed Alison: “It wasn’t me. I’m not in this. I honestly don’t know what you are talking about. I am not that type. And besides, whether or not you want to hear this, or believe it, I love you. Or, OK, “fancy you”. And all that. So I wouldn’t do that to you. Why play games like that. I am, I mean, hearing your stuff, my natural desire is to protect you. Be on your side. But look, I have no idea of your life, whether you have enemies, people wanting to settle with you. No idea. I know, you say you have nobody like that in your life, but who knows”.

“So we are in the same position? But look... I do have some questions. Legitimate ones, really. Like, whatever was all the fuss about on Sunday, knocking over that old lady’s food, getting out of the church, running so fast, like you’d committed a crime? And why... is this not the first time you’ve

been beaten up recently? There must be a reason? You say you don't know, but why? And also, and this is for me the most important, why don't you get baptized? You know the doctrines of the Gospel so well, you know that baptism is related to salvation, you've told me, you can quote Mark 16:16 "He who believes *and* is baptized will be saved", you can quote it in English or Russian, perfectly. But you don't do it. I mean, it'd look like you have a double life or something. And... well, I have a lot of other questions but they can do for now".

There was a pregnant silence. But it seemed the child would not come to the birth, or was stillborn. Dmitry looked to the coat rack and addressed himself to it: "Lucky you know Pink Floyd. "I can't explain, you would not understand". And, well, quite honestly, what was that line also in there about "you are receding, a distant ship, smoke on the horizon". Really you can't understand, that is not my fault and it's not yours either. It's how it is..."

"Doesn't the same song say about "But this is not how I am"? Sorry I don't mean to be teenage smart and that but... let's say, I am happy to hear your side of the story. Or, more sides of it. And if I still do not understand, well, *vot tak i yest*, that is how it is".

"Indeed, it will be like that. But... can I trust you... I mean, I ask myself. Sorry... I'm looking out of the window, not at you".

Alison smiled. The first smile for a while. In her best Russian she came out with a saying: *Pridyetsya vremya smotret, ne v zhyorkole a v okno*- there comes a time to look no longer in the mirror, but out of the window.

Dmitry laughed, very genuinely, and nodded approvingly as he caught her eye. "Yeah, very good. But that's more relevant for our *babushki*, and I'm not so old. Yet. And not a woman".

But Alison was quick to continue, with a tone of voice suggesting she wasn't going to let him slip off the hook because of how a passing joke had broken the frost on the ice.

"So, what was that all about yesterday at the church? And why, knowing all you do of the true Gospel, do you not get baptized?".

Dmitry nodded, in absolute engagement with her. "I'm not sure I myself understand. I don't sometimes understand myself. I like how Paul says that, Romans..."

"Romans seven".

"Yes, Romans. Seven or eight. Somewhere there. Yes, seven. I have so much of that chapter underlined in my pocket Bible".

Dmitry looked towards the window for a while at the fine snow falling and melting on impact on the glass, oblivious to the backside of the waiter passing across his field of vision.

"Well OK. I will trust you. Because, I love you. And actually even if you betray me, you will not achieve much. I will just disappear, fade away, to some other town, some other place... like so many of our Soviet guys have faded away, *gone into the woodwork*, as you say".

"Dmitry, I want to understand. I want to understand *you*, and I want to understand why ever I have gunmen on my case, as an innocent, good living woman. So, I do want to understand the commotion on Sunday".

"OK, OK. About what happened to you", Dmitry said very directly, locking her eye in his gaze, "I truly, truly, before God, I don't know. But about me... I told you of an incident one night in Afghanistan, just outside of Mazar. It's... to do with that. This Afghan field commander guy, he figured me, that I was not actually an American, that I was a Russian agent. It was my life or his, we were in a small building, just him and me, and his young son. I killed him. I strangled him to death, with the kid looking on. Well, he wasn't such a kid. I strangled the guy watching the son, you know,

looking over at him in case he went for me. He could've actually saved his father's life if he had gone for me. For some reason he didn't. He just stood there, caught, you know, like an animal in headlights, paralyzed. But you see, they..."

Dmitry's voice quavered, and tears were running from his eyes. From both eyes, journalist Alison noticed. Usually grieving people cry from one eye and then the other. He was from both eyes simultaneously.

"They both were so, so similar. Like... you say... pod with the same peas..."

"Peas from the same pod", Alison muttered, consciously trying not to allow herself to want to cry in sympathy with a weeping man.

"Ya. They had, both of them, very distinct birth marks, a kind of slight... deformity, on their right cheeks. They were so similar. Like they were almost... identical twins. After I knew the father was dead, I tied up the son and gagged him. As I gagged him I of course had a look at that... pock mark, what do you say. How to call it. He struggled with me a bit. I hadn't the heart to kill him too. Then I went out into the night, got away. With my life. And then... on Sunday, that Afghan guy, that was... him. It *was him*. The son. I know. I get nightmares about him. It was like a nightmare I've always had, come true. And there was Samuel talking about love and grace and Jesus and all that, and there was that guy, that young teenager, grown up. That's why I was looking down, so he didn't recognize me. He looked right at me though, and I think he didn't recognize me. But then, look... I've got the same questions as you. Why was I beaten up this morning, and other times recently. Someone's kinda on the lookout for me. And the only reason I can think of is... the Afghan guy. I even remember his name. I knew them, kinda, as a family. You know, those Afghans, they're very social types and that. I used to drink tea with them, kinda sign you are OK by them".

"Let's play our old game then. I'll write his name on a piece of paper. I talked with him on Sunday. He told me his name".

"Sure. But I know who it was. No doubt".

Alison wrote "Abdul" on the back of a red serviette and then passed her pen to Dmitry, who wrote "Abdullah" on a bit of paper torn off from the old copy of the *Baltic Times* which was lying on the table. They then solemnly exchanged the scraps of paper.

"It's like the Gospels and all that", Alison commented. She parried Dmitry's baffled look with an explanation: "I mean, the way they apparently slightly contradict on the surface, but, it's the same story, same truth, when you put them together".

"Ah, I see. I do remember going through all those kinds of reasons to trust the Bible, years ago, apologetics. But it never really persuaded me as I didn't need persuading, I know truth when I see it, like, when I read it. And I never liked that term, apologetics. It's like God has something to apologize for, like *we* have to apologize for Him, and... well, we don't have to. But anyway, yes, it's the same guy we're talking about. No question, there never was, for me".

"So OK... talking about not needing to apologize... I get you about Abdullah. I must say, he seemed to me a really genuine guy, I think he really came to Christ, seems just a lovely guy. So... well... good thing that you... good thing that he's...."

Dmitry cut in to save the struggling Alison: "Good thing I didn't kill him, yes, I know. Believe me, I know. And who knows, he maybe has more faith than me. Coz he got baptized, I didn't".

"You mean you don't believe...?" Alison asked, with some concern in her voice.

"No, well, not exactly. Of course I believe, but... the baptism thing. I know, I still have to answer you on that one. I suppose it's just that I have a barrier, what became maybe a real... psychological barrier,

a “hang up”, as you say, about churches. Even if I met the perfect church, and Samuel’s set up is about the best doctrinally you could find, I’d probably still have this problem. Within myself. Samuel told me so many times, baptism is into Jesus, not into a church or organization. He even told me I could baptize myself if I wanted, I could get baptized with him and walk away and never come again to his church. But then it’s also true what he says about the body of Christ, that sure we’re baptized into Jesus personally, but Jesus *is* His body, to be separate from His body, which is, like, the church, the *ecclesia* as he likes to call it, is to be separate from Him. He is the vine, the whole thing, we are the branches; not that He’s just the trunk and we’re the branches. “Severed from me you can do nothing”, he was on about it recently when he was talking about John 15”.

“So it seems like you’re making a good case as to why you ought to be baptized! But... I can understand you. I’ve explained a bit about all my grief with the body of Christ, the church, *ecclesia*, whatever. I’m kinda outside of it myself, not that I wanted to be, but, it’s kinda how life, God, maybe, wanted it, for the moment. And for me, meeting you, and that church you introduced me to, it’s kinda like... my prayers for... I suppose... *reconnection*... were kinda heard. But then just when I thought it was all too good to be true, you go all... how to put it... odd, running out of the meeting and all that. And then, I get threatened by a gunman. Rather like that Russian saying we talked about the other day”.

“Which one?”

“How did it go now... *Shyel na svidanku, popal na* ...you know, *popal na*... and then, that word for dog poo. I went on a date, I walked out to a date, all made up and ready to go, and stepped into... some dog poo”.

The mention of going on a date produced an awkward silence.

“Hate correcting your Russian, but for a woman, the grammar would be a bit different. If *she* walked out to a date and stepped into, well, that word... would be *shla na svidanku, popala*... That’s about all I have to comment on that really. But... yes, you’re right, I’d score you a ten for relevance and appropriacy of expression”.

“A ten? Ah... I see. But ten on a what scale? Out of one hundred?”

“No. Ten on a ten scale. Five for grammar”, Dmitry grinned back.

“So, that’s me, and I can understand, as I said, that you have some hang-ups with church. Especially what happened to your former wife, having an affair with an American pastor, losing your children. I... don’t mean to say I can empathize, I never had kids. But I did have a womanizer of a husband who was... a “brother in Christ”, a “sound brother” and all that”. Alison couldn’t disguise her bitterness.

Her indefatigable, relentless probe of the baptism question had registered with Dmitry and he was quite willing to engage with the issue. He continued, with the tone of resuming from a point left off at: “And then, there were things going wrong for me now and again, and I always blamed them on the fact that there were Afghan guys seeing me at church. Then the last few days, believe me, it’s been awful. I’ve been beaten, black and blue. There are some people on the lookout for me. I’m really going to have to leave Riga because of it. Sooner or later, they’ll do some real damage, even kill me”.

Alison’s face dropped. Dmitry noticed, and continued: “To speak honestly, *po chestnomu*, I’m staying here in Riga because of you. That’s the truth. It’s a strange situation. I want to be baptized. Desperately. But something just stops me from baptizing myself. I can see nothing wrong with it, in principle. But something doesn’t let me do it. It feels somehow wrong. Maybe it’s my Russian way, I don’t know, needing someone to have authority over me, not being able to take that final responsibility for myself, wanting... you know, I think, how we are... wanting... an umbrella, a system, an organization, a structure, to do it for me”.

“Well I think that’s true for all people, cultures and that. I doubt, I really doubt, I’d have baptized myself”, Alison commented sympathetically. “But you seem to be pretty hung up about this Samuel guy, whether he’s a bad guy or not, all he’s gonna do is hold your shoulders as you go under the water. I doubt he’s gonna drown you there in the bath tub. And if indeed he’s involved with these Afghans who you think are getting you beaten up, well, how would him baptizing you make things even worse? You never know, maybe, just maybe, God would kinda protect you a bit more after your baptism. Not that I think baptism guarantees us an easy ride through that kinda thing, maybe in a way it makes things worse in that God *really* starts working with you. Brings even more grief. Whoever baptizes you adds nothing to the whole thing. The guy who baptized me, I’m sure he was a paedophile, I hated him, his granddaughter was my friend in Sunday School, she used to tell me such awful things about... you know, what goes on behind closed doors. I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard he’d died. And I think a lot of, let’s say, my peer group did. But my baptism was the right thing, for sure. I never doubted that. I think baptism is the one decision we never regret”.

“OK, OK. That’s all true”. Dmitry strangely tapped the coffee mat as he spoke. “But. There has to be a connection between Samuel and the Afghans. He’s travelling every week to those, those Moslem places. And for sure, there’s a connection between the Afghans and me getting beaten up. I have *no* other enemies round here in Riga, nobody with old debts and scores to settle. What’s happening to me... and Alison you don’t know the half of it... is definitely the work of somebody with scores to settle with me. It can only be the Afghans. And when I saw Abdullah on Sunday, that... was it. The jigsaw became complete. Now I know. I can’t, I just *can’t*, allow a man involved with the Afghans, with my persecution, to baptize me. You say you think the guy who baptized you was a paedophile, well, if I *knew* a guy was a paedophile, I have to say, I would *not* allow him to baptize me. I’d just have to...”.

A brief silence was interrupted by the waiter asking if they wanted another cappuccino. Or something, perhaps, to eat?

“I’d just have to... do what I am doing. Pray God sends someone to baptize me. I mean, someone normal, a man of God”.

“But you don’t need a man of God to baptize you. And who knows, someone may seem the greatest man of God, and then years later you find they aren’t at all. Believe me, I have lots of experience of this, a lot of, if you like, case studies”.

Dmitry leaned forward over his empty cappuccino cup. “Alison, there’s a thought that comes to me. Maybe crazy. But, maybe *you* could baptize me?”.

Alison shifted uncomfortably on the leather seat. “I could, I suppose. But look... I came here suspecting you were the one behind me being threatened by a gunman. And wanting to have it out with you. And our conversation has ended up with me being some sort of persuaded that maybe you aren’t behind that. But to baptize you... I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like it. And I’m... a woman and that. Maybe I am old fashioned but I kinda always thought that kind of thing should be done by... well, brothers. Although... I can see no reason why not. But look... I really think you have a hang up with this Samuel guy. We’re both... experienced people, not kids. Why don’t we try to check him out a bit more and then, well, he could baptize you?”.

Dmitry shrugged. “But you said yourself, you can never know whether a person is really genuine, especially, those religious leader types”.

“Well in the ultimate sense, no, you can never be sure. But, let’s face it, those people there at the church are the body of Christ for sure, they believe just as you and I do. It’s so, so weird that with our specific understandings, no trinity, no devil, Kingdom on earth not in Heaven, hell as the grave not a place of fire and that, they are exactly as we are. In all the world, it’d be so hard to find such a group. And OK, if we really figure this Samuel guy is insincere... well... OK... I will baptize you. How, I dunno, but, OK, I will”. Alison’s air of resigned finality continued: “In a public swimming pool”.

Dmitry smiled. “You think I’m, like, gonna jump you or rape you or something. No, I respect you, and your... distance. That’s only right. It’s what I... what I really like about you. You’re... principled. That’d be right. A public swimming pool”.

Seeing Dmitry’s bruised eye contract as he smiled so broadly really pulled at Alison’s heart.

“OK” she said coyly. “But... let’s check out Samuel first. And... pray. I mean, seriously, you and I could be dead tomorrow”.

“Yes, all the more reason to baptize me soon. He who believes *and* is baptized will be saved, unless a man is born of water he cannot enter the Kingdom. Mark 16, John 3. I sound like Samuel, ha”.

Alison led them in prayer as she often did. The discussion moved on to how to figure out Samuel, to shadow his movements, hire a car and follow him wherever he drove, or take him up on his frequent invitations to come round to his apartment for coffee.

“There’s one thing I observed about him. You know there’s a break between the meetings. First of all at 12 there’s the Bible study, then half an hour’s break, and then the breaking of bread meeting at about 13:30. In that half hour he often goes out of the hall somewhere. And then sometimes the Afghans come in that break. Let’s try to see what goes on then. He always seems to make out he’s on the phone to someone. So he goes outside. But why would he be on the phone just then? And at the evening Bible classes, he’s the same. He slips out in the break”.

“Do the Afghans come then, too?”.

Dmitry was silent and then spoke as if making an admission: “No, they only come on Sundays”.

“Maybe he smokes?”

“I doubt it. And he could hang on, surely, rather than risk getting busted for having a fag, as it were. I mean it’s not the sort of thing a pastor does, go out for a smoke in the break between Bible studies”.

“True. I don’t get the impression that’s the reason”.

They agreed to shadow him in the break, and to get an invitation to his apartment and check him out more, asking him to show them pictures of his trips. The ashtray was strangely empty as the waiter finally slipped the folded bill underneath it.

The goodbye was hard and awkward. Alison slipped Dmitry a 10 Lat note. “I dunno, that might make something easier for you, somehow”.

It seemed inappropriate to part by merely shaking hands. And it was all too quick and too weird to part in a more intimate way. They stood outside the coffee shop and faced off against each other. “I’m really, really with you”, Alison said with intensity.

“And I am with you. And, whatever the words mean, I love you. As my sister, well, I hope soon to be my sister”. Alison blushed and swallowed on her suddenly swollen throat.

CHAPTER 8

Springsteen and Streisand

It had been many years since Alison had that feeling of counting down the days. She so wanted Sunday to come, to try to persuade Dmitry to be baptized by proving to him that Samuel was a normal guy, just a bit enigmatic. She couldn't let herself go, let the falling in love syndrome run its' natural course, until he was baptized. Alison downloaded some more Springsteen. And Barbara Streisand, *Till I Loved You*. And good old Abba. Surfed around on the net to look up "Self baptism", "How to baptize someone", tried to research a bit about forgiveness, reconciliation between murderers and their victims' children. She really, really wanted to join Samuel's church. Really wanted Dmitry to be there. But the thing with Abdullah... was going to be quite something. Why, why, does God make it so hard. Why did there have to be this Abdullah thing. But then... the gunman. They could marry and get out of this weird Baltic backwater. Maybe live in Russia, or somewhere else in the Russian speaking world, or, back to England. And... children. Children. Not too late, hopefully. He'd be a good dad. Dmitry was so smart. Maybe he could be a pastor, they could start a church. Just use Samuel's church to get Dmitry baptized, and then, get out. She surfed on in the silent online world. Translation agencies. Getting him a job as a translator, at least to start with. Not that they needed money. She had plenty. But he clearly needed a job for his own... male self-worth. One thing at least she'd learnt from Alan. And an online translator... she could take the payments online, he wouldn't have to worry about his status with documents, she could be paid as the translator and he do the work. And... yes, there were openings. Several translation agencies came up on Google. Five American cents / word. Wow. And she could proofread anything he had to do Russian - English. Larissa Volokhonsky. Always the name that comes up in translations of the Russian classics, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. The lot. But it was always "Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear, translators". In the casual obliqueness of the online surfer with time on their hands, Alison typed in "Larissa Volokhonsky" to Google, and found herself on the Wikipedia page about her. Pretty cool. Russian interpreter who fled the USSR and met an American translator, Pevear. Fell in love and got married. The classic cold war romance. Now live in Paris, with their three trilingual children. English, French and Russian. Have now translated most of the Russian classics as a husband-wife team. How cute. How cool. It'd be... kinda the other way around with Dmitry. Just... looking at the list of their work, there weren't many Russian classics, it seemed, that they hadn't done, and won a zillion awards for their work.

A couple more meetings with Dmitry. No more threats. Ilze had calmed down, very friendly and normal, seemed her new girlfriend was filling her voids. No snide comments about Russian men, about Alison's singleness. The over coffee discussions with Dmitry gave her a chance to share with him more of her own background. But it was hard to get an ex Red Army senior officer to empathize with the dramas of a small time Protestant sect in South London. But some things were easier than expected. Alison spoke much of how the concept of "guilt by association" had destroyed her life and church; once somebody was disfellowshipped, excommunicated, then anyone who fellowshipped with them was also cut off, even their own families. Whenever anyone thought slightly outside of the box, departing from a traditional way of understanding some Bible verses, then they were "disfellowshipped", and their friends and families then had to choose between loyalty to the church, and doing what was right before God and appropriate for the relationship they held with the person who had been cast out. And so all genuine thought and fearless exploration and growth was stillborn, or at best, stilted.

Dmitry coped with this well: "Sure, I can understand that. It's basic sociology, psychology. The bad side of the Soviet version of Communism featured just the same. All regimes that claim to uphold principle, and attach vital importance to their principles, have to operate like that. And it's also what we naturally tend to do; if my friend is friends with my enemy, then my friend is no longer my friend, or, let's say, the relationship is affected. The USSR and your church, seems they just... how to say it... institutionalized that understanding, put it in so many words. So Alison, again..."

Dmitry caught Alison's eye head on.

"And so again, yes I do understand. It's why many of us feel more anger with Gorbachev for ending it all and making this... this human *mess* here in what once was the USSR... than with the West. We feel more anger with our own side than with our enemies, if some on our side burst the boundaries, let the 'other' come in, change the traditions".

Dmitry drew a circle on the crinkly table cloth. And then we drew another circle.

"The East and the West. The boundaries were hard. Yes, I could make a good case for the Berlin wall. There was a case for it. For stopping our people going to the West and all that. Censoring stuff from the West. Nothing wrong with hard boundaries. The believer in Christ, and the world. The Bible... kinda teaches hard boundaries too. John's letters, light and darkness and all that. We are of God, they are not, I think John said somewhere there".

Alison nodded. "Yes, I grew up with "Better dead than red", that was I guess a hard kinda boundary, on our side. So it's when the boundaries are breached that... what happens, do you think?"

"A lot happens. A lot has happened. Just look out of this Coffee Nation window... and you see it right here in this city. But one thing that happens, is that there's a lot of anger with the ones who breach the boundaries. We were always told how the left wing parties in the West were always attacked, the Communist party guys had eggs thrown at them in the streets. And was it really so that there was some thing about "Reds under the beds?". Did you guys really say that, or fear that?"

Alison smiled and raised her eyebrows, trying to remember. "Yes... "Reds under the bed", I think they said, only *one* bed, not *beds*, so far as I recall that saying. I mean, I was only really a kid at the height of the cold war".

Dmitry laughed. "One bed, ha. Well let's not go there. A... somewhat amusing comment just came into my mind".

"But you won't share it?" Alison asked with all her charm and feminine curiosity.

Dmitry smiled again. "Well... I've gotta work it out, get it worded right. Tell you some time. But back to topic... I can understand the guilt by association thing you talked about. Really I can. Sure I was never in that kind of church environment, but, in basic terms, in essence...", the furrow lines on Dmitry's forehead showed strongly. "In essence, *po suti dyelye*, in principle, I do understand what you went through in that environment".

"I'm so glad for that", Alison said, deftly. "But you know... that brother Jim, I told you about him, who had a big influence on me. I remember him saying in one what they called "exhortation", the sermon on Sunday, that children only know half their parents' lives, they can't empathize with what went before. Parents only know half their children's' lives, because usually parents die first. Children only live with their parents for say half their lives. Even if you find the best partner in life, they only walk with you in life from the time you met, and onwards. We have no one continual partner in life who was with us from birth to death. We cannot explain it all to some other person, to the point they empathize. You know, that difference between sympathy and empathy. So, Jim used to say, this drives us to God, to Jesus, the only Ones who have been with us all the way through and will be to the end".

Dmitry nodded in agreement, the hypersensitivity of in-loveness making him wonder whether this was Alison taking a step back from him. For she had after all implied that human relationships were only... so good so far, and not the ultimate deal.

The short silence was broken by Dmitry. "You know, there's something that worries me, not much, but, it does. This thing is like how years ago I used to look up at the sky as I stood on our balcony having a smoke, and used to wonder whether really, there's anyone out there. I went through a phase

of having momentary doubts about whether there's really a God. I don't have those now, but I have those passing doubts about whether... all our focus on doctrine, I mean you and me, our focus, on how important it is, say, to believe God is one and not a Trinity, the Kingdom of God will come on earth and we don't go off to Heaven when we die, that hell's the grave and not literal eternal fire, Satan is just an adversary and not a dragon who fell off the 99th floor... how important is it really?"

Alison enthusiastically nodded and felt like hugging Dmitry. "I have *exactly* those same doubts! And like you, only sometimes. Not all the time. The Christadelphians used to baptize illiterate people in Asia and Africa who just loved Jesus and believed in Him, but they didn't have a handle on that kinda doctrinal stuff. That got me thinking..."

"I have a kinda fantasy, that I would've been born into some illiterate low caste in India, and I just had to love God and Jesus, care for my wife and kids, get them enough rice to eat each day, or whatever they eat out there, and that was my life's duty". Dmitry's eyes were momentarily far, far away. Far away from Coffee Nation in post-Soviet Latvia.

The pictures of London's Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower in Paris which were hung on the wall jerked Dmitry back to reality. "Maybe it is as Jesus said, that to whom much is given, much is expected. He who knows his Lord's will and doesn't do it, gets beaten with more lashes".

"Yes!" Alison responded with surprising passion for such an undefined and inconclusive area of discussion. "Yes, I have often answered my doubts with just the same verse, Luke 12 it is. Like you I underline verses in my Bibles, and I've underlined that one a few times. In different colour pens, as I recall".

"Maybe it's a phase I'm passing through", Dmitry shrugged. "It's the same question as to what happens to the kids who die young, the mentally ill, life on other planets, those who've not heard". After a brief pause, Dmitry added: "Or not understood properly. Like... my dear mother. My father, even. I don't know. But I know God showed me His truth, and I have to run with it".

"I have to say this", Alison blurted out. "But Dmitry, because I so very deeply... *care* for you, you really ought to get baptized. And... I'm so praying that we can sort this, I mean, that you can sort it, and I really think Samuel's church has something to do with the answer. I know, Abdullah and all that. And you getting beat up. I know..."

"Well, I don't know. I really don't know. But, we have our plan for Sunday don't we. I'll shadow him when he goes out in the break. And we'll get invited back to his place for Sunday afternoon. Play it very slow. Maybe Alison the journalist has a list of questions you want to ask him?"

Alison tried to hide her disappointment at hearing the words "play it very slow". "No, I have no questions in mind. We'll just observe and, well, discuss it afterwards".

"That's just great! That's... exactly what I wanted to say. Just how I too think we should play it".

Dmitry's days waiting for Sunday went as usual. Lunch at the Hare Krishna place on Brīvības street on Friday, and on Saturday lunchtime at the Baptist outreach just off Viestura Prospekts. One night at the railway station, walking around outside between 1 and 4 in the morning when the waiting room was closed. Because of a threatened incident at the night shelter. But not too much beating, just a funny feeling from some of the guys, as if they knew something about him, or knew that he was in trouble with someone.

Alison couldn't sleep Saturday night. She kept waking up worrying that her new perm would get damaged by laying on it. Dmitry and Alison had noted that they hadn't smoked at their last two meetings, and had promised each other to quit. Midnight smokes were hard to quit for Alison. But she thought of Dmitry and believed his promise, that he would be strong if she were strong.

Walking through the snowy streets, trying to curb the enthusiastic bounce in her step, she noticed what looked like Ilze's car parked in a side street. But she couldn't be sure it was the same registration number. She giggled at how Ilze was now an issue of the past. Alison arrived at the hall just before 11 when the doors opened, taking her place amongst the folk who seemed they'd spent half the night pacing in the snow, waiting for that sound of the key in the door from the inside. She added her footprints to theirs for five minutes or so. The hall was a one storey, long and thin building, overshadowed by 12 storey Soviet era apartment blocks. Dmitry had worked out the door code to the one opposite the hall, and would watch Samuel's movements on leaving the hall during the break from a landing window on the third floor.

CHAPTER 9

Event and Meaning

Samuel was clearly pleased to see Alison. “So you came back, ha! *Really* pleased to see you again”.

“Me too, I’m glad to be here. Really, I am. Because I spent a lot of time this week looking at your stuff online, you’re all over the net. Listened to some of your MP3s, read a couple of your books as PDFs. Very unusual to find someone, or, a group, a church, that believes just as I do”.

“Yes, I preach a rather unusual bunch of doctrines I guess. The JW’s are the only other non-Trinitarians in Riga, so far as I know, and they have a lot of other baggage that I think is clearly wrong. What do you make of baptism? I mean, have you been baptized, understanding all the stuff I write about in my books and teach here?”.

“Yes”, Alison said quietly. “I have been baptized. But I guess I fell away from the... the actual church that baptized me. I was baptized by the Christadelphians. I think I told you last time?”.

“Yeah, sure. Just right now, as you can see, I’m rather... busy. Would you like to come back after the meeting to our place for a chat? My wife and I always invite some people back to our place afterwards for coffee and maybe we can chat some more? Beth really likes talking with people in English; she’s Canadian, not been over here as long as I have... not quite *homo sovieticus* as it were”.

“Oh, that’s kind of you”, Alison said immediately, heart pounding as she received the invitation she had been angling to receive. “Yes I would very much like that. I’ve also been talking to one of your, your visitors. Lives in the night shelter on Maskavas. He seems to have some barrier to being baptized. Could he come too?”.

“You’ve been talking to the locals, ha. Looking for a story? You’ll get plenty of them, with these dear folks”.

How did he figure I’m a journalist? was the obvious question in Alison’s mind. She was one of those off duty journalists who was touchy about being perceived as being one after hours, as it were. *But why would he let his game away if he is that smart, implying he knows all about me?* Just wondering whether Dmitry had it right about this guy, she bravely asked:

“And what makes you think I’m a journalist?”.

Samuel smiled in a relaxed way. “Oh, I noticed you’re very kinda observant and loved chatting to the guys last week. That’s all. About the only British people here in Riga are either religious, charity types or journalists. Just, a guess. But that’s not here nor there, main thing, it’s pretty amazing to meet a British person here who shares our faith. Really, quite a freak of coincidence. So anyway, which of them were you talking with?”

“Oh, Dmitry”, she said, quite nonchalantly.

“Dmitry... in the Maskavas shelter. Not baptized. Ah yes, *that* Dmitry. Lovely guy, I always had a special soft spot for him for some reason”. Despite having a line of people clearly wanting to talk with him, Samuel said quietly with intensity and evident happiness: “I’m *so* glad you’ve been talking with him, it’ll be so great to get to grips with why he won’t be baptized. So... sure, just wait till meeting’s over and we can walk back to our place together”.

Alison felt suddenly lonely as she stood by the literature table, noticing the contributions box into which a few people slipped just a few Santims. Dmitry wasn’t there, the Iranians and Afghans she’d met last week hadn’t come, and there were many new faces. Clearly everyone knew each other well,

but many didn't make it out to the meeting every week. Samuel's body language was good. He touched arms, gave a few conservative hugs to a couple who apparently hadn't been for a while, pulled out a pair of spectacles from his jacket pocket and gave them to a very appreciative old lady, listened patiently to a middle aged man trying to explain something to him from a battered Bible. If he was a big sham, he had gotten so into the act that he must be at least partly sincere.

As before, he prayed, an alcoholic looking sister read a chapter, very well and expressively, and Samuel launched off into an exposition of it, with plenty of questions and comments at the end. But Alison's mind was with Dmitry in the apartment block facing the hall. The third floor landing window. And what would happen at the break. She suddenly regretted that Dmitry didn't have binoculars. She could've bought him some. There was a guy who hung out outside the Rimi supermarket, selling Red Army binoculars and other army gear. He kept telling her how his binoculars were worth hundreds if purchased new, and he'd take whatever banknote, i.e. over five Lats, she might give him for them. But too late. And yet she had a small camera in her pocket with a good zoom function. If only she'd given it to Dmitry, he could've observed this Samuel guy close up.

At last the 30 minute break came. And sure enough, Samuel put on his overcoat and slipped out of the door, apparently talking on his mobile phone. She watched him pacing around outside the door for a few moments, and then saw him stroll away. Dmitry had teased her about feminine curiosity and journalist bugs, just as Alan used to. All the same. Alison half opened the door and watched Samuel from behind. Once he was beyond the building, suddenly his stroll turned into a purposeful walk. For sure he wasn't really talking on that phone. He half glanced over his shoulder a couple of times, and walked holding the phone in his hand as if it were a walky-talky. Samuel turned right into a street which ran between two apartment blocks. Alison watched Dmitry move from the landing window and emerge from the apartment block opposite. He ran up the street after Samuel. And Alison opened the door fully, and ran after him.

Dmitry was clearly angry with Alison for coming with him. Very angry. He merely grunted at her explanations of having a camera which could zoom in on him. "I'm right about this guy" was all he could continually mutter. Reaching the corner of the street which Samuel had turned into, Dmitry cautiously peered around the corner.

"What did you see?" Alison asked urgently.

"He's there. But he's turning into some bushes. I'm right about this guy".

The apartment blocks could be entered from the rear as well as the front. "If we can get into these blocks and get up onto the landings, we'll have a bird's eye view of what he's up to", Dmitry whispered; even though there was no need to whisper. Dmitry and Alison ran along half the length of the apartment block from the rear, and chose an entrance. But the door was protected by a coded lock. Alison's heart sunk. Dmitry began to peer closely at the code box. "How can you figure out the code?" Alison enquired.

"These are old mechanical locks, not electronic ones. You can see which buttons are more worn. And figure it from that. Maybe. Sometimes. Let's see... the nine and the one are worn here".

Dmitry punched the nine, then the one, and then "Vhod", "enter". The door didn't budge.

"Maybe the other way, one first, then nine?"

"I doubt it".

That didn't work either.

"It must be nine and one, somehow...".

With an enthusiastic flash of pride, Dmitry grinned almost mischievously at Alison.

“One nine nine one” Dmitry said as he punched the keys. The lock clicked, and the door opened. “1991, the year the USSR ended and Latvia got free. A year to remember, for both sides round here”.

They scampered up the stairs. Hammer and sickle graffiti on several landings. “Viva CCCP”, viva USSR, had been painted quite nicely on one landing, and a far cruder artist had scrawled “RE” before the “viva”. This was clearly a Russian block, no doubt about that.

They got to the fifth floor before looking out of the landing window. Samuel was crouching in the bushes.

“What’s he doing? He must be... smoking, snorting cocaine or something” Alison said, mystified.

“I doubt it. Not that guy”, Dmitry whispered back.

Panting together, in close proximity, forged a new dimension to their previous coffee table relationship. Alison pulled out her camera, and Dmitry looked at her with resigned respect. Slightly crestfallen he muttered: “You’re right. That really is handy now”. Alison zoomed the camera in on the crouching figure in the bushes. “He’s crouching like he’s... going to the toilet almost”, Dmitry marvelled. They kneeled down at the low window to avoid camera shake and get the clearest picture at maximum zoom. Alison involuntarily put her hand on Dmitry’s arm.

“Carl Zeiss AG”, Dmitry read off the camera. “Amazing lenses. Is it on maximum?”.

“No, let me... just... get it to the end. Let’s not touch it, just leave it balanced on this sill. And we can look”.

Their heads were close, dark and blond hair pressed together, as they both strained to see the small screen. Samuel was indeed crouching on his haunches, head in his hands. Rocking slightly. He remained like it for a few minutes. He then arose, brushed the snow from his overcoat, and took out his mobile phone again. Alison was exhaling as Dmitry was inhaling. They smelt each others’ breath and took it into their own lungs.

With a few glances over his shoulder, Samuel walked purposefully back to the road and put his phone to his ear. “He’s clearly not talking on that phone”, Dmitry observed.

“Obviously not”, Alison stated emphatically, with some disappointment in her voice. Clearly all was not well with this Samuel guy.

As soon as Samuel reached the turning into the road where the church hall was located, a car drew up next to him. Alison and Dmitry opened the landing window and could just about crane their necks to watch. The car stopped suddenly, a door opened, and Samuel shook hands with a man in it and appeared to direct them towards the church hall. Alison zoomed the camera as best she could from that angle, leaning out of the window, but only she could view the screen.

“So who was in that car? Who did he shake hands with?” Dmitry asked urgently.

“Abdullah, and the others in the car were the other asylum seekers”, Alison said, slowly. She felt like bursting into tears. The whole situation was obviously not what it appeared. And now Dmitry for sure wouldn’t go near the church again. And she didn’t really want to either.

The car drew off, Samuel placed his phone at his ear again and walked towards the hall.

“Alison, look. Just join the dots. You want to know why I don’t let that guy baptize me? Would you?”.

“Yes, I do understand you now. And... no, I wouldn’t want to be baptized with all this going on in the church doing it, or with the guy doing your baptism. No... I do understand you. But... I dunno”.

“I know”, Dmitry cut in, guessing her thoughts. “The asylum seekers, Afghanis and Iranians and them, they’re usually there at the start of the service, at the start of the first study. They don’t usually come in the break. And he goes out *every* break, whether or not they’re present or not. And he goes out on the Monday meetings too, when the Afganis aren’t there either”.

In the silence of that fourth floor landing, the two pairs of confused eyes caught each other. “I really, really don’t know what’s going on. I admit, I, highly trained in espionage and all that, I can’t figure it. I just can’t. But I know it’s not good”.

Alison nodded with small movements of the head. “I... the journalist, the mediocre woman, average intelligence, bit higher maybe, dunno, I also... I feel just as you do”.

They walked down the flights of stairs in silence.

“He asked me back to his place. I said you’d come too. Was that... OK?”.

Dmitry paused before answering. He shrugged. “Well, OK. What can they do to me? OK... OK. I’ll come. Have another go at figuring out all this. Because... you know, Alison. It’ll have to be you”.

Alison couldn’t conceal her hopefulness, even if it was a hope she didn’t want to quite allow herself: “What do you mean, have to be me?”.

“To baptize me”.

“Ah”, she smiled. “Abba, “Why did it *have* to be *me*”, I was listening to that last night. Anyway, I’ll go back into the church, and you... wait outside. He said when everything’s over, he’ll walk back with us to his place”.

“Well... OK. But maybe... people might see us, you, me, and him and his wife and their kids, walking along. Could be... problematic. You know why... me, kinda, in with the foreigners and all that. But... if we don’t sort this out, really, I’m gonna have to leave Riga, get outta here. Simple as that. So... OK. Why not. I’ll make some excuse as to why I wasn’t at church. He notices, that guy. He notices who’s there and who’s not. I observed him, he has a photographic memory for people, names, stuff like that”.

Alison paused as they emerged into the street where the church was located. “It’s all so, *so* like David and Jonathan. Sorry to say it, but, well, it is, isn’t it. Jonathan went back to the court of Saul, David stayed in the wilderness. And Saul noticed that David wasn’t present at that feast, and all that”.

Dmitry shrugged. “Yes, I have thought about you and me as David and Jonathan, many times, actually. But... I dunno. The Western theologians, new wave and that, say they were gay, they were in love with each other. But I don’t think so, David was hetero as they come. Anyway, quickly, go back in there. I’ll just... hang around. For, what, an hour till end of service, another hour while he clears up. See you in two hours”.

“But Dmitry... it’s so cold... here, take a couple of Lats. Sit in a cafe somewhere and have a coffee”.

“I’ll be fine, but, really, thanks. Thanks”, Dmitry added with the softness of appreciation in his voice, “Thanks that you thought of how I’ll be. But hanging around on the streets, at the back of apartment blocks... I... know how to do it”.

Alison returned to the hall, worried at Dmitry’s possible pullback from her. It was great he’d got the connection between “them” and David and Jonathan. But then he’d said that David and Jonathan weren’t really in love and he had said one of his “I dunno”s about it. But then, Dmitry’s not baptized. He’s not in Christ. I can’t be in love with someone who’s not in Christ... but I *am* in love with him... but OK, I can’t have a *real active relationship* with someone who’s not in Christ. Let’s settle for that. In her former life, Alison had been accustomed to making spiritual resolutions for the week at the Sunday meetings of the Christadelphians. And that was her resolution for the week, as Samuel in his

piercing way went on about guilt and grace, grace and guilt, the conscience *cleansed in Christ*, as he said several times with exactitude, precision and passion. And the power of reflection on the cross to elicit real self-examination, self knowledge. Somehow this guy spoke to her heart. Especially when he spoke about the necessity yet the difficulty of “attaching meaning to event in our lives”. But Abdullah, Dmitry himself at times, this Samuel guy... Sunday Bible study and worship was all very well, fine words, intellectual challenges all very nice. Just a shame the realities never change, they obtrude all the same into the reveries of a moment.

CHAPTER 10

The Hard Drive Man

Beth enveloped Alison in small talk as they cleared up the hall, always interjecting something spiritual, something about Jesus, into the trivia of the conversation; about dustbin liners which always break, the problem of biscuits trodden into the carpet. Beth let slip she was a doctor, had graduated the top medical school in Riga. Alison began to wonder if there was far more to this bubbly, apparently naive Canadian than appeared. Met her husband on the internet, well, that's what a lot of people say these days.

The four of them and the children trudged together through the snow to an apartment block facing onto Nordeki Park. The usual graffiti on the front door, but an electronic code lock on the door, a step up from the block Alison and Dmitry had been in earlier in the day. But all the same, a nothing special block in a poor neighbourhood. Samuel helped Beth coax and carry the children up the rather tall steps, cracking rather funny jokes as he did so. He opened the door into their apartment and courteously bade Alison and Dmitry enter first. They all went through the ritual of removing their snow covered shoes in the hallway.

"Sorry, don't have any slippers to offer you guys".

"That's OK, no worries" Alison responded, wondering whether that was just an image of poverty.

"Well, we have slippers, plenty of them. Just that the folks who come here from the night shelters, they have a lot of skin diseases, and if you wore slippers they'd worn... you might not come to see us again", Samuel commented.

"Yes", his wife commented with her usual smile, "our slippers are all in quarantine just now!".

The apartment was large but humbly furnished, with the repairs and decor looking as if they'd been done by a DIY man who could do that kind of thing but was far from expert. Dmitry recalled how Igor had said he'd watched Samuel changing some parts in the engine of his old jeep, and he seemed to take ages to do it and to get frustrated with himself for not doing it quicker or smoother. Maybe. Igor, after all, was hardly a very observant guy. There was a star of David in the hallway, and a framed photo of a man in military uniform. A few other very old black and white photos, of four boys. The man in uniform looked similar to Samuel.

"Your family, maybe?" Alison enquired.

"Yes, Samuel's brother", Beth replied. "He's in the IDF".

"IDF?" Dmitry queried.

"Oh, the Israeli army" Beth replied, as if eager not to embarrass a guest.

"And these four little boys, this old photo?" Alison politely asked with another smile.

"Oh... that's Samuel's father, and his brothers", Beth beamed back.

"I see, Samuel's uncles", Alison responded, rephrasing and returning what she'd just been told to build up the rapport.

"The little boys that *would've been* my uncles, well, two of them anyway", Samuel interjected. Dmitry was watching and listening carefully. "*Would've been?*", Dmitry queried. "Now that's a second conditional tense, isn't it, in English grammar?".

“Yeah well what I meant is that, they *would've been...* coz, well, they perished in the Holocaust”.

“I see...” Alison said. “The *shoah*, don't you say, in Hebrew?”.

“Yes, that's what they call it. But I don't really claim to know Hebrew that well”.

Beth as the perfect hostess tactfully redirected the conversation, onto types of teas and coffees. Starbucks coffee sachets sent over as a present from “a brother, a brother in Jesus I mean, in America. Or, we have Roiboos tea, it's really nice, comes from South Africa, but you can buy it in Maxima now. I *love* it with *milk*, it's *so* nice!”.

“Let's play *shops*, daddy!” the little girl interjected.

Samuel lay down on the floor with her and played with her as she squealed with delight. Seeing him laying down there, the little girl grabbed his raised head and announced “I am going to baptize you into the name of *Jesus*! Splaaaash!!”.

Daddy arose with a grin. “There you go, Dmitry, simple as!”.

Dmitry brushed it off. “As if! Not as simple as that. Not quite. But hey, I never knew you had so many *books*! I think I've never seen an apartment lined with books like this”.

“Ha”, Samuel responded immediately. “You know, it's a good way of avoiding having to do the walls properly. The plaster boards got all warped when I put them on, well maybe they'd been exposed to moisture or something in the shop before I bought them, dunno, but they look a mess. So... good way to cover up awful walls. Stick book shelves on them, and line them with books. Then you never get to see the walls behind them”.

Alison ran with the book theme. “Wow. I must say I've never seen such a collection of religious, Bible books in someone's home in this part of the world. How many of them have you read?”.

Samuel looked serious for a moment. “Most of them. I've always had a policy of not buying a book unless I intend reading it”.

“Really?”, Alison responded in genuine surprise and respect. “That's a *lot* of reading. How do you manage it, or, how *did* you manage it? Quite an achievement!”.

“Well I travel a lot, and travelling wastes a lot of time, or, *can* waste a lot of time, airline lounges, sitting on trains in Siberia which never leave, you know”.

Dmitry muscled in on the conversation. “So where are you off to this week then?”.

“Oh, Morocco. Right into the beginnings of the Sahara, a little place just beyond the Atlas mountains”.

“And what's there, apart from sand and camels?” Dmitry enquired.

“Bunch of guys. They've been reading my stuff online, and want to break with Islam and get baptized. They have looked into other churches, but they can't hack the Trinity. They like our view, that Jesus is Son of God, not God Himself. So, pray for me”.

“Sure. I will. Could I join you on one of your trips like that? I'd love to meet people like that!” Alison asked, interested in his response.

“Well... I have a policy of not travelling alone with a woman, but sure, Beth's been with me out there to Morocco, twice?”

“Yes, twice” Beth beamed back. “Lovely brothers out there, feel *so* sorry for them, having to live for Jesus in that Islamic culture!”.

“Well”, Samuel resumed, “Sure, maybe some time when Beth’s coming with me, sure you could come. That’d be... great!”, he summed up with final enthusiasm.

“You must have lots of photos of your trips all over the place. I know, you show them at the hall sometimes. I’d love to see Morocco though, and, well, what about Afghanistan?”, Dmitry probed.

Beth dutifully provided everyone with their drinks. “We don’t take sugar ourselves but, here you are, some sachets of sugar, if you’d like. And... I’ll just get some spoons, teaspoons, for you”.

“Sure, gather round” Samuel invited, lifting his eyebrows as he glanced towards his computer. Alison and Dmitry drew their chairs up. Samuel went into Windows Explorer, selecting “My pictures”, and the eagerly inquisitive pairs of eyes looked at the carefully listed folders. “MoroccoSept”, “AfgJuly”, “AfghanVarious” and so forth.

Dmitry pointed to a folder: “What about “AfghanVarious”.

“Sure” Samuel responded.

He flicked through various pictures of Afghanistan, of baptisms, street scenes, soldiers, men with guns.

“And... AfghanDocs”, is that more of the same?” Dmitry probed further.

“Oh... that’s just documents related to my work in Afghanistan. I was interviewed on TV about things there, did interviews in a couple of newspapers. I’ve... gotta go to the loo, but please, help yourself, look through the folders”.

Stealing a wary glance at each other, Alison and Dmitry opened various documents. PDFs of press interviews, Samuel surrounded by smiling men with guns. Baptism certificates. Beth and Samuel standing with a box of petitions outside a UNHCR building. Petitions from Samuel and Beth to the UNHCR. Correspondence about a visit to the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva.

“The real deal”, murmured Dmitry.

Samuel was caught up playing shops with his daughter, and the little boy was craving his attention too. “Always the same Sunday afternoons”, Beth smiled, “they so want daddy’s time when he’s been up front there at the hall. So, take your time, look through whatever you want. All interesting stuff. He’s had an interesting life, my husband. Really, done a lot of good for people”.

“Yes, I see... all really *most* fascinating”, Alison smiled back.

Samuel returned to his guests, apologizing for being absent.

Gently nodding her head, Alison continued with genuine curiosity: “So, you basically spend your time running the church here in Riga, and teach people about, well, “the truth”, as I’d call it, and go baptize them and then try to bail them out of their problems and persecution issues? That’s... what I’m seeing from all this”.

“Yeah, something like that”, Samuel replied in an offhand way.

“But some of that stuff is... pretty scary. I mean, Beth, I read in one of those documents of you and Samuel ten years ago, smuggling Iranian Christians over the mountains into Kurdistan, into Turkey. With the border guards firing bullets over your heads as you lay faces to the ground up in some mountain?”.

Beth’s characteristic smile no longer extended to crease her rosy, country girl Canadian cheeks. Soberly, she explained that yes, indeed, that was God’s hand... “It was our honeymoon. We decided we’d do that smuggling run for our honeymoon. We flew to Tehran the day after our wedding,

gathered up the brethren Samuel had baptized on his last trip there, and went with them through the mountains. Yes... it was scary, but... God blessed it. It's also why, well, Samuel and me, we're... so... close. And... there were other things". Beth proudly placed her hand on Samuel's leg. She caught his eye and they mutually smiled at each other.

"So... it's really how those journalists wrote, you two lying there with bullets zinging above your head as you lay there with some Iranians you'd baptized, high up in the mountains trying to get them into Turkey?"

"Yes", Samuel said matter of factly. "Those kinds of things... journalists can have a holiday, I mean, they don't have to make things up and twist things round. The facts are, well, as they are".

"So was anyone killed?" Dmitry enquired, in the same matter of fact tone as Samuel had spoken.

"Not then, no. Set off an anti-personnel mine though. God's grace, really, we weren't hurt. Just covered in mud".

Dmitry looked at the floor as he recalled his own experience with landmines going off behind him in Afghanistan.

"But, well, maybe you read, saw the photos. Some of our brethren were executed, yes. Maybe you saw those photos of the man being hung from a crane. I was zooming in from a distance, sorry they weren't that clear. I... I had baptized that guy, that brother, two days before".

Dmitry and Alison didn't look at each other, but they both made identical shifts in their body language as they recalled the zoom on the camera they'd used earlier in the day. All too strangely coincident with their own experiences.

Alison looked at Canadian country girl Beth with new respect. After all, that stuff had been on the BBC, in big newspapers, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Times on Sunday* back in the UK. It was likely to be true. Journalism notwithstanding. And... this girl... was a doctor. Likely not so young as she looked from a distance, and no simpleton either.

"And what about Abdullah and the Afghani guys at church?", Dmitry blurted out. An unusual lack of tact, hardly a united front, Alison reflected. We really ought to have worked out our strategy with this guy better, *far* better.

"Abdullah? Yeah, *lovely* guy" Samuel responded immediately. "Feel sorry for those guys. Got converted to Christ out there in Afghanistan, persecuted, I mean, *really* persecuted. Then, well, they get here to Latvia as it's the softest European country to get into, I mean, the most corrupt, thinking they're getting to Europe. And, well, you know the scene, it's not the West. And they are there in the detention centre and then the Asylum Seekers Centre out in Mucenieki. Latvia doesn't know what to do with them. So in cases like that, I explain to them what the Bible really means, give them their first Bible in some cases, and then, well, baptize them, try to advocate for them as best I can. All they've done is convert to Christianity, but they don't know much. It's like, putting meaning into words... *Meaning into Words*, there's an English course called that", he mused.

"And Abdullah and those like him, you think they're sincere, or, just doing it to get documents and live in Europe?", Dmitry questioned.

"Well, who knows the heart of men, human motivations and the affairs of the heart, who knows. But I can say, circumstantially, as it were, that guy, he's sincere. I pray with him, he prays, I pray, he shares with me what he learnt from his Bible reading during the week... no, he's sincere. I really believe so. If I thought those guys weren't, well, I wouldn't waste my time with them. I never had much time for spongers off the system, kinda, not how I was brought up, Protestant Work Ethic and all that".

“Mmm” Dmitry responded after a short silence. “So, we don’t know the hearts, the sincerity of others. Samuel, to get right to the point, I had a lot of bad experience with churches, and, well, like, a pastor from America, he took off with my wife, my kids. I know you, Alison too, you all wanna know why I won’t be baptized, well that’s something to do with it”.

“Oh I’m sorry to hear that, about your wife... Yes, gotta separate church from God, I’m afraid”, Beth enthusiastically cut in. “We suffered *so* much from churches, Samuel more than me, but, we did. But it doesn’t take away the truth of Jesus, the Kingdom, eternal life ahead, does it...”.

“Well, that’s what I’ve been telling Dmitry”, Alison said, following Beth’s ever upbeat tone.

“Yeah, Beth’s right”, Samuel said quietly. “Separate church from God. And there’s another idea I found helpful”, he said, the lines on his forehead showing clearly as he lifted his eyebrows and motioned towards part of the bookshelf. “Emil Brunner. He kept on in his books about the visible church, and the invisible church. The visible church is what’s evident to us, churches, denominations, fellowships. That’s from our viewpoint. But God sees the invisible church, the real, actual body of Christ, whoever’s been properly baptized into Him, what Brunner calls the invisible church”.

“Emil Brunner?” Alison queried.

“Yeah, Brunner. Quite the big name in his day. He was, you know... a classic. Even in his own time. Right out of the best of the Western intellectual tradition. And, you know”, Samuel continued, turning towards Dmitry directly, “the best of the East got there too, just in a different way, in Tolstoy, all his stuff raving against the Orthodox church”. Samuel nodded again toward a different part of the book collection. “*A Confession*, that was saying the same kinda thing, what Paul meant when he said that the Lord knows them that are His, it’s just, well, me paraphrasing Paul now, but Paul goes on to basically say ‘And you make sure you really are His’. Rather like the end of John’s Gospel, there’s Peter and John following Jesus, kinda classic ending really, and Peter says “And what about the other guy?”, well OK that’s Sam’s paraphrase, the Gospel according to Sam, and Jesus says to the effect “Well don’t worry about the other guy, just focus on following Me””. Samuel looked quite pleased with his own profundity.

“So, you’re saying, don’t worry about me, I’m just Sam, saint or sinner to you, doesn’t matter, just, you need to be baptized so you can follow Jesus, and, well you’re happy to do it for me if I wish”, Dmitry said in a somewhat stressed voice.

“Right on”, Samuel responded instantly, with a gentle grin. “Or, as I’ve told you, it doesn’t have to be me. Anyone can put you under the water. Even... this fair lady here”, he grinned at Alison, “or, anyone, your friend Igor, my wife, anyone. As far as Jesus is concerned, “All you gotta do is say yes” to the Gospel, I mean, to the true Gospel; who puts you into the water is, believe me, neither here nor there”.

Dmitry seemed cornered. Alison looked toward him expectantly, thinking how ‘The cornered lover’ would be a good title for a poem or novel. Surely... he would have to back down and say “yes” to baptism.

CHAPTER 11

Tears In The Breaks

“Ok, Samuel. I don’t like to do this to you, but, I have to. Really I have to, if you are going to baptize me”, Dmitry said loudly, looking directly at Samuel in an almost menacing way.

The quiet spirit of Sunday afternoon intellectual discussion about Emil Brunner and Tolstoy was shattered. Alison visibly recoiled. It sounded for all the world like Dmitry was going to pull a gun. But every time the word “baptize” passed Dmitry’s lips, there was a ray of hope in Alison’s heart. Samuel seemed unfazed, and he smiled with relaxed confidence as he responded: “Sure, go ahead, whatever’s necessary”.

“Yes”, Dmitry said, as if pouncing on a victim, “this *is* necessary”.

Alison regained her posture as she perceived there probably wasn’t going to be anything physical happening.

“It’s just this, Sam. I don’t know if I can trust you. I had bad, bad experiences with Afghan people, and, you seem very in with them. So. I followed you today when you went out of the hall. You always seem to go out in the breaks, and I was suspicious. I *am* suspicious. You don’t really talk on your mobile phone when you leave the hall and return to it”.

Samuel looked at his shoes and hung his head as if in shame. Beth ushered the children out of the room into a bedroom, blushing deeply.

“Correct?”, Dmitry asked, stressing his consonants.

“Absolutely”, Samuel whispered, his head hanging even further and shoulders slouched. Alison felt strangely sorry for him.

“So, what was all the crouching in the bushes, and what was the meeting with Abdullah all about, you know, he drew up in his car and you spoke with him. I want to know. I think I have a right to know”.

There was a deep silence. No answer was forthcoming. “Checkmate”, Dmitry was thinking and almost said.

“Samuel, I saw enough total insincerity in religion, in Christians. It was an American pastor who went off with my wife. And my kids. I have been honest with you. I have told you as it is, what I saw. If you don’t want to answer, that’s fine. Just you will never see me again. Baptize whom you will, but not me. I mean this”, Dmitry said turning to Alison, “not a *single one of you* will see me again”.

The silence continued, with Alison so wishing Samuel would answer. Because it really seemed Dmitry would up and go and really, that would be the end. May as well do what she often mused of doing... get a taxi from the rank out there, get the driver to go to the airport via her apartment, pick up the laptop, the only thing she really needed, get to the airport, passport and credit card in hand, buy a one way ticket, and be in London by evening. Get a coffee and wrap in McDonald’s there in the arrivals terminal at Gatwick South terminal. And be done with all this. Get a hotel for a few nights until she found a flat to rent. Dot com. Dot done.

“Why are you silent?”, Dmitry probed Samuel, with the scent of both anger and victory in his voice.

“I’m just deciding, whether or not to tell you the truth”, Samuel muttered.

He then lifted his head up almost defiantly, as if making some last stand, and engaged Dmitry directly. “First, you have it wrong about there being anything odd going on between Abdullah and those refugee guys and myself. You’re right, I do go out in the breaks, and yes, sure, I’m not talking to anyone on my phone. Today, well, it was really chance that they just pulled up in their car as I was heading back to the church. They only greeted me, asked me if I wanted to ride with them in the car for, whatever it is, 50 meters, I said no, and, well, they went on. Nothing more than that. Maybe looked suspicious to... suspicious eyes, but really, nothing more than that”.

Dmitry broke the ensuing silence again: “And so, OK, what’s the rest of it, then?”.

Voice heavily shaking with nervousness, Samuel launched off: “You see, as Beth mentioned, I had... some unbelievable problems with churches. It... they...”, his eyes clouding and fixing into the 1000 mile stare, “they did some terrible things to me, broke my family, broke up... so much. And continue to do so. I am... OK. For the most part. But it left me with some, dunno how to say it really... some kinda psychological... issues. I have a hang-up about churches. You do, I do... so, you should know what I mean”.

Samuel held Dmitry eye to eye, and continued:

“I... well... I dunno about *hate*, but, I can’t really handle churches... the whole scene... coming together, a hall, a guy giving talks, people eating together. Yes I know... not being able to eat or drink with others means you’re crazy, the shrinks all say that”.

“Shrinks?” Dmitry enquired.

“Psychologists, psychiatrists”, Alison quietly explained.

“Well anyway I don’t think I’m that crazy. It’s just, being in a church setting like that, it restimulates so much. I do it for others... I go to church not for myself, but as a way of... let’s say... serving others, doing my thing for them. But it’s... very hard for me. Very hard”. Tears were coming, and one seemed caught on Samuel’s right cheek.

Dmitry couldn’t but talk more gently now. “And so... what was the crouching in the bushes, then? What were you doing?”.

Samuel said a word that even those straining ears didn’t catch.

Alison asked “Sorry?” and Dmitry “What?” at the same moment.

Samuel looked up at them and said the word more clearly: “Crying. Simply... crying. What I’m... doing now”.

Alison wanted to touch and comfort him. It was all making sense. She didn’t know if Beth would be offended if she touched him; and she was in the bedroom with the kids, but surely she was overhearing the conversation. Alison craned forward. She sought by all means to come to the rescue of this lovely man:

“I see, really... I see. I had similar experiences. Spiritual abuse, that’s the in term at the moment. Really, I had it. I was disfellowshipped, excommunicated, *withdrawn from*, whatever you like to call it. I got divorced, so, even though I didn’t remarry, I’m... a fallen woman. When... I know, I’m not really”.

Samuel seemed suddenly in control and recomposed: “Didn’t remarry?”, he grinned, “Well not yet, ha. And what will they do to you then, I wonder! What’s the next step after disfellowship... as Jesus said, the time will come when those who kill you think they do God service”.

Dmitry was visibly taken aback by Samuel's sudden recomposure. "So... is that really it? You go out in the breaks to, well, you say, "cry"? And every time, I mean, you do it like clockwork. Why not "cry" in the washrooms?"

Alison craned her head back. There was no need, quite, for that.

Samuel shrugged and calmly explained that people were always using the washrooms, and anyway, he felt he had to just get out of the building, whether it was snowing or shining. Beth returned and hugged her husband, explaining how she too had been disfellowshipped because she refused to agree that her husband was a heretic, and because she still broke bread with him. The little girl crept in to the room quietly, dragging a forlorn dolly over the parquet.

Dmitry shook his head a little and enquired, as if prompted by the child, "So... if, say, this girl grows up and gets baptized, she would be disfellowshipped if she then broke bread with her mummy and daddy?"

Alison nodded her head. "That's right", Beth said quietly.

"When they disfellowshipped me and I asked for Bible evidence, the guy said "Sam, you know the rules, you know the game". Yes, it's the way they play the game. Right across Protestantism, even the Catholics and Orthodox have some concept of excommunication, *iskluchenie*. It's I suppose... a kinda human thing".

Another silence, this time interrupted by Samuel continuing: "So I guess we can conclude that religions, churches, instead of rebinding people to God, you know, what 'religio' means, they so often act as barriers between God and people. It's why in our church down there, we, well, I, Beth and I, we tried to learn the lessons. So... Dmitry. Well done for being suspicious. I have told you the truth, that's how it is, it's where I'm at, who I am, how I am. I know, it must sound all a bit weird, but..."

Alison cut in: "Not weird at all!". Dmitry looked less impressed, but Alison continued: "Not weird, no, to me, it makes absolute sense, I don't know what you've been through, but I know what I went through, and yes, it makes so much sense. If I had to run a meeting, get up there and give talks and be the public face, I... well, yes, I would be the same, just, I probably wouldn't be able to hack it at all. You know... I feel *so* close to you guys, although I don't really know you...". Dmitry nodded in agreement with that last phrase.

But Beth was right in there: "Yes... I feel the same about you Alison! We're really lacking in people who have, you know, depth of knowledge of the Bible, and, well, maybe we can discuss sometime how we could do some more outreach together, maybe an English language church aimed at expats here, or, a woman's church or something. I'm the type who... needs someone else to fire me up, I mean, Samuel's great, he keeps me motivated, but he's really got no time for any new initiatives himself, so you know, I was praying about meeting up with someone like you. And it's so great you agree with us on all the doctrines! It usually happens that even if we don't make a deal about those things, once people know you're not Trinitarian, well that's the end of that, from their side".

Alison engaged with Beth and the two chatted about their church experiences, and the possibilities of reaching out to women in Riga.

"Like a house on fire, I'd say that's the right idiom isn't it?" Dmitry observed to Samuel. Samuel's gentle smile reminded Dmitry that this was closer than he had wished to go to this man. He quizzed Samuel some more about Afghanistan, raised Abdullah again, and revisited the whole scene of Samuel's hang up about churches, crying in the snow... and other stories. The story, so far as it went, seemed to be consistently told. But the way Beth was charming Alison, wining and dining her towards confidence and trust... was getting too much for Dmitry.

"Well, thanks for the afternoon, plenty to think about. I shall keep thinking about the baptism issue. And", Dmitry added curtly, "apologies if there were too many questions, if I went too direct, but,

these are big things for me. And to say... to say honestly, I don't apologize for shadowing you today, Samuel".

Alison's disappointment was hard for her to disguise, impossible, in fact. They had agreed to leave Samuel's apartment separately and meet around the corner. Beth and Alison smilingly exchanged phone numbers and emails. "I'll just call you right now", Alison volunteered, "so you have my number on your phone". Beth registered the number in her phone address book as "Alison new friend" as there was another Alison already in her address book, and showed it to her. The two giggled, until Beth offered to pray before their parting.

"Oh sure. And, could you... mention Dmitry, that he decides for the Truth, for Jesus, and gets baptized; and actually, for me personally". Alison continued in a more subdued voice: "I've got some personal issues going on in my life. Actually... maybe some time, I'd like to talk to you and Samuel about them. Just... not right now".

Beth beamed back predictably, and held Alison's hand as she prayed.

In the brief silence after they both said "Amen", they looked at each other. The way old friends do. But Beth had something more serious to say: "And Alison, please pray for Samuel. Really, he has been totally traumatized by all what's been done to him by people, so-called *brethren*, who believe, on paper, doctrinally, as we do. And I think you know about all that it seems from your own experience". There was an uncharacteristic bitterness in her usually pleasant voice. But Alison was happy to sense that if that pleasant voice had been a mask, it had genuinely come down.

"You just wouldn't believe what they did, what they do. It's like, truth is stranger than fiction. You could... write a novel about it. I have no idea how my husband handles it. He just, well, throws himself into caring for people, preaching, studying the Bible, being a great wife and daddy".

Alison nodded, in sober seriousness. "I *can* believe. I can understand. I know. I saw it all, in my own family. I was in England a while ago, for my grandmother's funeral. There were two funerals. Our side got to do the internment. But then my uncle came the next day with his crowd. My parents' home is just a few doors from the cemetery entrance. My uncle came, knocked on our door. I opened it and he said "Where is my mother buried?", I said well, do come in, and that. He said that no, he couldn't".

"Why?".

Alison smiled faintly. "Well, sorta tragic-comic really. He said he had been reading Strong's concordance- you know the book, a kinda dictionary of Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible?".

"Yes yes. Samuel has it".

"Well he said he'd been reading it, and there is a Hebrew word for "fellowship" which means to cross the threshold. Apparently. So he said he couldn't cross the threshold. It was raining. I put on a coat, grabbed an umbrella and walked with them to the grave in the cemetery. It was pouring with rain, not the usual English drizzle, it was a real tropical kind of rainstorm. They stood there, my uncle recited Psalm 90 from memory, you know, the prayer of Moses, our days are so few and all that, and then he waffled on in some long prayer about maybe God would have mercy upon my granny. She was in "another fellowship", she was an apostate".

A smile creased Alison's face.

"And what was so funny about it, then?" Beth enquired.

"Well, his wife, my aunty, was holding an umbrella over him. It was tipping down with rain. He got all mad with her. Because he said he was making her sin by praying with his head covered. I think he actually swore at her. I was standing a bit away from them. And then he said to the effect that for sure, my granny would, like, "go to hell", I mean, he didn't actually say that, because like us,

Christadelphians believe “hell” is just the grave, and good and bad go to the same place, even Jesus went into “hell”, the grave, for three days. But he sort of meant that as she’d not been properly buried by faithful brethren she was, well, not gonna get on too well at the day of judgment”.

“I see”, Beth nodded. “I had all the same. When my nan died, they asked me not to attend, coz, I’m married to a heretic after the first and second admonition, a reprobate. Guilt by association and that. But anyway, to fly back to Toronto was a bit daunting for me with the kids so small. And, I guess, nan wouldn’t have really wanted me dirtying her funeral”.

More upbeat, Beth continued: “And of course it’s not just all that stuff Samuel suffers with, he has people on his case because of, you know, his work. In all those crazy places. And you know, here too in Riga, there’s a real underworld, Latvia is, you know, like the South America of Europe, the South Africa, or at least, as South Africa used to be”.

Surprised at this Canadian country girl’s handle on history, Alison probed further, although she got the gist: “What more exactly do you mean?”.

“I mean, that people in Europe who need to disappear, to go underground, if they have money, they come here. Like people, Nazis and that, did to South America, South Africa. No questions seem to have been asked. As you must’ve gathered, you can live quite well here if you have money. And, things being corrupt, you can go to ground quite easily. Even pretty well buy a Latvian passport if you want”.

“Yes yes, I know all about it”, Alison nodded. “I’m writing an article just now about why Latvia has the highest value banknote in the world, 500 Lats, worth say one thousand American dollars. Of course it’s because this is the money laundering capital of Europe and so much hot money around”.

In the brief silence, Alison couldn’t help but wonder about Samuel. Riga would be... just the place for him. Maybe Dmitry was... partially right. Dmitry would’ve commented, for sure... that, yeah, your shady husband came to Riga, the right place for him... with all the other... whores and gamblers, as he put it. It was all rather odd, in a way. But then, not in another. Had the ring of truth to it all through.

“You sounded just then exactly like your husband, talking about South Africa and South America!”, Alison complemented Beth.

“Oh... well, we were in both those places, him and me, baptizing people, doing some welfare things. And, anyway, that was *my* impression at least”.

“Sure. I think Riga at this time will go down in history as the melting pot of all kind of waifs and strays and people who wanted to disappear, who had money behind them, and, you know, ex Soviet leaders, army guys and the rest”, Alison wryly commented, half repeating a comment she remembered from Dmitry.

“Well, I actually ought to be going”, Alison summed up, thinking of Dmitry waiting around the corner in the -15 temperature.

Dmitry was pacing around the “Buļļu Iela” number five tram stop. He’d done well with quitting smoking, but he had an overpowering urge to smoke. He checked the garbage can by the defiant pole that carried the “Tram 5” sign, standing erect in the piled up snow. Nothing. And butts have a way of disappearing into the snow when dropped. “Spare a smoke?” he asked three passersby. No luck. And he had boasted to Alison how in Soviet times, you could always cadge a smoke from anyone in the street. A grunt and a few words in Latvian from one elderly man who possibly was speaking with a Russian accent. Raised eyebrows from a woman who stepped into the virgin snow to avoid him in disgust. Clearly the Soviet Union had been subsumed by capitalism. Couldn’t *now* get a smoke for free. Dmitry stopped pacing and walked purposefully towards the Fenikss mini casino further along Slokas street. An angry man emerged, shrugging his overcoat around him, and started walking back towards the tram stop. Dmitry tried his luck, to be met by silence. Surely God was at work, stopping

him. But then, after a few paces, the man turned around. Dmitry remembered one of Samuel's themes, that God tries to stop us sinning, but, if we wish to go in a way, He will confirm us in it. "Take this", the man abruptly said, "I'm quitting".

"Just one is OK... I'm trying to quit myself".

"No, take the packet". And the man strode off, carefully following the trodden pathway through the snow on the sidewalk.

But Dmitry reflected that Samuel also always said about smoking that it's not so much of a sin in itself, just bad for health, and we should use our lives for God not ourselves.

It was too much for Dmitry to ask the guy for a light too. And so Dmitry paced around, asking passersby for a light. Again no luck. And again his boast to Alison of how it used to be in Soviet times came back to haunt him, for a few frozen moments. The tram came and whisked the man away. A few people got off. Two lit up immediately. But for some strange reason, the camaraderie between smokers was frozen in the low temperatures. One woman put her lighter firmly into her handbag and didn't seem to want to extract it again. A young guy took pity but shook an empty matchbox in Dmitry's hopeful face. And wouldn't give him a light from his self-rolled cigarette. "Might break it, and I'm without another light myself".

Dmitry wondered at God, shaking his head. His mobile phone was in his shirt breast pocket, and he felt the gentle purr of a text coming in. "C U at T 5 stop in 2 mins".

"You gotta smile at God sometimes", Dmitry muttered. He grinned as he threw the packet into the garbage can.

Alison gave him an uncharacteristic hug when she arrived. She was very careful with her body language. "You... didn't smoke, did you?" she earnestly enquired.

"No. God stopped me. He's... in all this".

Alison grinned. "Let me smell your breath. Like, they used to do to us after CYC... that's, "Christadelphian Youth Circle", we used to hoot off round the corner of the church after the youth meetings and into some wasteland behind it, when we were kids".

Dmitry grinned back. The thought skated through his mind to say "Only deep kissing really reveals it" but instead he obediently breathed onto her grinning face.

"OK, let you off. No letter home to your parents this time" Alison giggled.

Dmitry was in no mood for this kind of thing, although it was not an unpleasant interlude for him. "Well thanks... but seriously, we need to debrief. Join some dots. No decent coffee joint round here, nothing till the city centre".

Alison wondered about inviting him back to her place. But self control kicked in. "Well there must be... you know, at least somewhere".

"Well there is, a *zabegalovka*, down there at the tram 5 terminus".

"A *what?*".

Dmitry smiled. He was always proud to teach her Russian slang. "Literally, a place to run in to, a kinda shelter from the wind, it means, a cheap cafe that sells maybe chocolate and vodka and coffee. And most importantly, is warm".

Alison followed Dmitry through the snow. The trodden path was narrow, they had to walk in single file, and Dmitry went first. Alison kept thinking of how the Russian term for a woman marrying is

“zamuzh idti”, literally, to walk behind a man. She wondered if Dmitry was thinking the same. Maybe... inevitably he was?

CHAPTER 12

Operation Quartz

Dmitry held open the door of the cafe for Alison, and she entered- to be assaulted by the cigarette smoke, Abba music and the suspicious eyes of a few people hunched over tables. Even the two old men playing chess in the corner temporarily lifted their eyes from their vital pursuit.

They ordered two coffees, and Dmitry firmly removed the ash tray and placed it on the neighbouring table. "Thank God for that", he commented. Alison nodded. It was indeed quite a victory. The cigarette smoke now irritated her. She looked in vain for a no-smoking area, but then raised her eyebrows in wonder at herself that such an establishment would boast anything like that.

Dmitry pressed forward towards her over the creaking, unstable coffee table.

"You seem convinced by the guy. I'm not. All he says might be true, so far as it goes. But it doesn't mean there's not another side to him. The girl, she's naive as, I know you were very taken with her, but it's a classic case. Those types always pick up those types. Sure, play with the kids, good daddy, sure. The Nazi leadership, apparently, were the same. Their wives and kids stood up at the Nuremburg trials and said what great and kind guys their husbands and daddies were. And maybe they were. Like, Hitler loved kids. Just, German kids. Not Jewish ones... or Russian ones".

Alison indignantly stood up for her new girlfriend. "Beth's not naive. She's smart. Very quick mind. And, we looked through his hard drive... and these days, you can tell a guy by looking at his hard drive. And they weren't expecting us, he didn't, like, put a computer there just for us to see".

Dmitry shook his head. "Do you think a guy like that would have his personal computer there on the table for his wife and kids and guests to look through? I somewhat doubt it. And he goes out to cry in the breaks?".

Alison enthusiastically pounced, rather like Dmitry had done to Samuel a few hours earlier: "But to me that crying in the breaks is the real proof. It all hangs together. I mean, we shadowed him. He did nothing suspicious. It all... hangs together, has the ring of truth".

Dmitry with equal enthusiasm came back at Alison: "But *he spoke with Abdullah in the break*. The guy who watched me murder his father. And here I am getting beaten up, for all you know, I may be dead tonight".

"Yes but it's true what Samuel said, he only spoke with Abdullah for a moment then. And usually Abdullah isn't there on Mondays, and Samuel *still* goes out in the breaks. And sometimes Abdullah arrives at the *start* of the meetings, and Samuel goes out in the breaks and Abdullah remains *in the church building*. I really don't think it makes sense to think Samuel is out there plotting with Abdullah in the breaks. I mean, they could hatch their plots any time, not in the breaks at church. Correct?", Alison pushed her point home.

Dmitry shrugged. "So... you rest your case, ha. You should be a criminal defence lawyer.... Maybe, you kinda are".

Alison pursed her lips. Holding herself back from making a comment in all seriousness about Russian tendency to paranoia and conspiracy theory.

Dmitry changed his tack, tacitly recognizing that perhaps the link between Samuel and Abdullah in the breaks was indeed tenuous: "OK, well I was thinking, just while I was waiting there for you. In fact I have had this suspicion before, just, well, now I'll verbalize it".

Alison with the very quintessence of eager expectancy and hope peered forward toward Dmitry. The rickety table couldn't decide which of its' damaged legs to come down on as they both pressed upon it.

"You've heard of Operation Quartz?"

Alison closed one eye as she struggled to remember. "Vaguely heard of it. Wasn't it something to do with Rhodesia, Zimbabwe and that? I don't know, really".

Dmitry nodded approvingly. "Impressive. Yes, it was."

"And...?"

"Well, in 1990, some of us saw the end coming. We could see that Moscow, I mean Gorbachev and his lot, were caving in, selling us out. The writing was on the wall once we gave up in East Germany, once Walesa and Solidarity came to power in Poland, and by the end of '90 it was clear Lithuania was going to make a run for it. Once one Soviet republic broke away, we knew that was the end. USSR would collapse, the "Union" would be no more. Lithuania had the most organized resistance movement of all the Soviet republics. There were fewer Russians there. We knew it was a matter of time before the Latvian nationalists... did their thing. So, there was a plan amongst some of us to take control of the situation here. Our plan was to grab control of all military installations in Latvia, basically... let's say... liquidate the Latvian opposition leaders... install an emergency Government in Riga".

"*Murder* the leaders, you mean?"

Dmitry shrugged. "That would've been the bottom line. It would've been a kinda Bosnia situation, Riga would've been the Sarajevo of northern Europe. In some of the mixed areas it might've been house to house fighting for every block, every apartment. But we figured if we acted quickly, we could avoid all that. Install the new Government, make it clear we were loyal to Russia and the USSR, tolerate no nonsense, then some time offer the population a referendum. We would've had to purge the military of ethnic Latvians, or those pro independence. That wouldn't have been that hard. Then, take firm control of the nuclear missile dump outside of Liepaja, on the West coast of Latvia, and use that as a kind of bargaining chip to keep the West from hitting us hard. We had all the maps, plans, all ready".

Dmitry looked over his shoulder again to triple check he was out of earshot. A woman, clearly some kind of small time prostitute, was gazing into space chain smoking, as a drunk manual worker sitting opposite her leered hopelessly toward her face. The music was up quite high. No chance she'd hear, but Dmitry lowered his voice all the same. There was a defiant pride in his eyes as he continued:

"We had weapons and ammunition stockpiled just down the road from here". Dmitry beckoned with his eyes to the right. "Down there, in Bolderāja, in those sheds at the back of the railway sidings there".

For some reason Alison put her hand on his arm. He was... a man. So her father would've said. She hated the whole macho scene, and he seemed somewhat back in the last generation as far as his ideas of men and women were concerned. But somehow... that old style female respect for a fighting man came to her. There was again a break in the conversation.

Alison softly quoted Abba's *Fernando* : "Since many years I haven't seen a rifle in your hand... how proud we were to fight for freedom in despair".

"That's not how the song goes", Dmitry sharply commented. They sing "How proud we were to fight for freedom in *this land*. And anyway, it was *me*, not you, not... *we*. And in the end, I didn't fight for freedom in this land. Never... had the chance".

Alison smiled. "I know. When I was a kid, we weren't allowed to listen to pop music. No radio, no TV. When that song was playing everywhere, that's how I understood the words. "*In despair*" rather than "*in this land*". But later, yes, I got it right".

"Yes", Dmitry nodded, even quieter. "I would've been proud to fight for freedom in this land, even in despair. The Latvians talk about freedom, fighting for freedom against us; that they were the so called freedom fighters, and we the oppressors. But we had *principle*. For me, yes, to fight for the values we stood for as Soviets, that was fighting for freedom. Not this... mess, utter mess, you see here today, this is hardly freedom", Dmitry said as he rolled his eyes around the *zabegalovka* with its peeling wallpaper and cheap Chinese made light shades.

The pride of defiance slipped from Dmitry's face in the half light of that cheap cafe. "But anyway, I never got to fight. Moscow let us down. Without them, we were just a bunch of guys sitting and talking. A storm in a... coffee cup, flutter in an ashtray, we could say. So to speak. But what I have in view is this. That...". Alison involuntarily noted that his sentence construction was slipping into Russian style. He was thinking more than ever in Russian and speaking it out in English.

"It is in this, that... that I have a lot of enemies from that time. Latvians who'd like to see me gone. I've begun to think maybe they are behind my getting beaten up".

Although motionless, Alison could perceive a mental shudder within the man sitting opposite her.

"In fact", he continued with an air of final desperation, "I should leave here. Hitchhike to the Russian border, slip over the wire in the forest, out there beyond Krāslava, and... fade away. Into the Slavic jungle".

Alison's heart missed a beat. It looked for all the world as Dmitry was about to get up and walk out.

"I... in a different way feel the same, Dima", Alison mustered the courage to say. "I have in my handbag my passport, credit card and... just a bit of money. I think, more often than you would imagine, of just getting a cab to the airport, maybe drop back to the flat to get my laptop first, and then, just go to the airport and buy a ticket on the next plane to London. I imagine myself doing it. How I maybe'd have to wait at the airport for a bit, how I'd buy coffee from those coffee machines there".

Alison's phone rang. It was Ilze. Alison fumbled to press the red button to silence the call, and then reject it. And firmly placed her phone on "Silent".

"And why, *why* exactly, don't you do that? I mean, you're getting threatened and all that?" Dmitry asked in a tone of genuine mystification.

Alison's blush was invisible in the poor light.

"I'm struggling to be honest. Dmitry, I don't want you to misunderstand. I have no, *no* reason to be here anymore. I stay because... of *you*. I love you. But we have to sort out this baptism thing, and, well, the whole situation we're both in, getting beaten up and all that".

Dmitry peered intently at her, eyes wet. Voice breaking, he looked at her face but not into her eyes, focusing somewhere on the bridge of her nose: "I... am the same. I can't stand this place any more. I stay because of you. Simply so".

In the raft of issues before them, it seemed inappropriate to raise the baptism issue yet again. Almost desperately, Alison seized on a neutral point of conversation: "And why did you name your plan Operation Quartz?".

"Operation Quartz... I dunno if you know much about Ian Smith, the Rhodesia Front, UDI, how he and the white minority fought against the Soviet backed black guerrillas, Mugabe and them. Eventually, Smith and the whites had to give in. Though", he added with respect, "they fought like..."

men. Like real tigers. No resources, landlocked. Backs to the wall, betrayed by their buddies in the West, Britain, sanctions and all that. We were taught that the way the Communist guerrillas dislodged Ian Smith and white Rhodesia was, like, the classic case of Communist, Soviet victory. That the revolution worked, we won, they lost. So we studied it carefully. Although... the mess out there now, it's perhaps the biggest proof we... had it wrong, in some ways... those poor people, they'd have been better under Smith than Mugabe. Anyway, when Smith and the whites were about to hand over to the blacks, there was a plan by some in the white leadership called Operation Quartz, to trash the peace agreement, and, last ditch as it were, take military control of Rhodesia, murder Mugabe, fight to the end. You know, although we studied Smith and white Rhodesia as an example of our enemies whom we beat, I kinda got to respect them, for having principle".

"So... Operation Quartz never happened?"

"Operation Quartz never happened. Neither of them", Dmitry commented, with an air of other worldly abstraction mixed with the soberness of utter concrete reality. He looked so much in need of an ashtray and a cigarette to fill out his image to completion.

"But back to Abdullah, to all our questions, Dmitry it really seems to me that Samuel is not the one behind you getting beaten up. I know, a pastor regularly going out and weeping in the snow in between his talks at his church, I know, it *is* odd. But... ring of truth, to me. This Operation Quartz thing, well maybe there's something to that. Maybe someone has it in for anyone associated with Samuel's church? Beth was telling me, well kinda strongly implying, that he has problems with underworld figures here in Riga. She mentioned it to me just after you left".

"So Alison, again I say, join the dots. You getting threatened must be because someone knows you and me are... how to say in English... an item. Together, *connected* anyway. You say you have no enemies here. I do. Samuel has enemies. I have enemies, from... the Operation Quartz thing. As we followed Samuel, maybe people shadowed us, and, figured out we're... in this together".

"In *what* together?"

Dmitry brooded, fingering his lips. "Well, nothing, really, but maybe people suspect something. So they go not only for a man but for his, well, loved ones, close ones. They figured that was you. That is classic Soviet style".

"Or maybe these are just unrelated incidents. You and I both being threatened, in your case", Alison added sympathetically, "actually getting beaten up. And then... the coincidence with Abdullah... which surely is from God. Too freaky otherwise. Don't leave God out of the equation".

Dmitry responded with a level of agreement which surprised Alison: "Yes, I've thought the same. I had a friend...". His eyes clouded with distance before continuing. "A friend from... the old times. A professor of both statistics and astronomy, teaching at the university, in Novosibirsk, not far from where I came from in Talitsa... back there, in the Urals, in Russia. He was another military guy too. He used to tell me about freak coincidences, how so many theories are built on stats which are just coincidences. Like, the number of cars passing the tram stop in 24 hours may be the exact same number of people sitting on the Riga-Moscow train at the same time. In Communist times, to keep full employment, people were employed to count such stupid stats. And the coincidences were amazing. Between the most... banal, absurd things. But there was no relationship between them. And there are weird things which happen, which have no real physical explanation... he reckoned there are stacks of UFOs flying around, material in the cosmos which has no... like I said, real explanation...". Dmitry's voice trailed off.

They sat in silence for a long time. Some minutes. Alison then summoned the courage to be hopeful again. "So maybe really these things are all coincidences, and, well, you should be baptized, trust Samuel, and maybe then everything will get clear, will unravel?"

Dmitry sat in silence for some time with Alison intently watching.

“OK Alison. Thank you, really and truly, I thank you, for everything. You are probably a good woman. But, you are naive. I murdered Abdullah’s father, before his eyes. Samuel is not what he seems. He goes out to cry in the breaks between his talks at his church? And meets Abdullah? As if. For all I know, you are his agent. If I remain here a few more days, I may die. Even tonight. Don’t worry, I will be baptized. I will find someone, somewhere to do it. God bless you”. Dmitry calmly put on his overcoat and walked out into the night.

Alison sobbed. Until she realized she was being watched. Even the drunk man trying to work out where to spend the night with the prostitute had gone quiet and was watching her. Alison walked to the bar and asked to pay for the coffees. “You mean, you want another two coffees?” the nervous waitress enquired.

“No, to pay for those we... I... had”.

“But you paid when you ordered them, of course”, the woman carefully replied. You pay up front in such establishments. That’s a law... a law of nature, almost, once you enter those doors. And Alison knew that very well.

Alison silently walked toward the exit, noticing Dmitry’s footprints in the snow as she opened the door.

“*Devochka! Devochkaa!*” came a cry from inside the cafe.

“You forgot your hat”.

“And your scarf!” came the voice of the prostitute.

Alison walked home, as if on autopilot, although she didn’t know those streets so well.

She sat with the light off in her small kitchen. Tried praying, but the words didn’t come. No worries, as Jim Proctor used to say, Romans 8... we have a mediator who reads our heart and expresses it with groans to God in Heaven. So what did I get from the Dmitry thing... I stopped smoking, even now, no desire. Maybe God leads us in a weird path to answer our prayers. I prayed to quit, and here I sit, quit. And... Operation Quartz. Never knew about that. Although you can probably read about it on Wikipedia. No flights tonight, this late. Don’t really want to sit in that airport drinking coffees from the overpriced coffee machines at the entrance to Departures. Got my... purse with credit card, passport, will pack my laptop... book a taxi now. For... eight a.m.? Better check the net and see what time the flights are. What do I need from here? Few clothes. Only want hand baggage.

Alison decided to book a taxi, and removed her phone from her handbag. She had turned it onto “Silent” in the cafe with Dmitry. There were... five missed calls from Ilze. And a text. “Call me urgently, Ilze x”. It was... Sunday night? Or Monday? No, Sunday. Been at church today. A long long day. Must be about something at the office. But... what are we there. What were we. A pool of journalists. Anything left there? No... just the umbrella. In the corner. By the hat stand. I’ll text her from the airport and say... or maybe email. “For personal reasons I’ve decided...”, all the best... “It was, and I say this genuinely, an absolute pleasure working with you all and I wish you all the best in journalism in the Baltics... a pleasure to work with professionals...”. Maybe send it from Gatwick airport, once I arrive. In case... I lose my nerve.

But... Samuel. And *Beth*. Poor woman, stuck here with those kids. But she’ll survive. And... she has a husband. Maybe enigmatic, but surely, not such a bad guy. Maybe... keep in contact. Invite them for a holiday to England. Offer to pay for them all. Go on a trip with them somewhere. To baptize Moslems or something. And even one day... just maybe... come back to Riga for the odd weekend. That church of theirs is something.... special. God is with them. All just *too* weird that they believe the Truth. Who else in the world apart from them?

And... Dmitry. Surely he was sincere. Just... too much for him. If he really had murdered Abdullah's father before his eyes, and now he meets him here in a church in Riga. That... yes, that was a bridge too far. No real resolution for that one. And getting beaten up, picked on. Maybe, really, he had people who wanted to settle old scores with him. And who knows really what those old scores were... Maybe that Operation Quartz stuff was just half the story. Or... far less than half, and one of many issues. And that gunman... really, yes, I must leave. Billy Joel, *The Piano Man*.... "man, what are you doing here?". No, I'm crazy staying here. Even another day. Even tonight. Go, go, run, be gone, be like Dmitry would do, fade away, like those brave white soldiers of Ian Smith's Rhodesia, fade away, disappear... and in my case, just... go back home. Brave or not. Or just caught by circumstance, within good principles loyally upheld. Simple as. Back to blighty, to... some suburb of south London. Live... live to fight again another day.

Alison powered up her laptop. It was strangely silent when switched on, no fan, no sound at all. Springsteen came to mind: "And the only sound at night's the wind / Slammin' that back porch door". That seemed so... Western, the back porch door. When you lived in Riga in a matchbox apartment, with no porch, in minus 20 at night, when you never left a door open to be slammed by the wind. Maybe really, cross-cultural relationships just don't... work. For long. Dmitry wouldn't quite have understood that, "the only sound at night's the wind / Slammin' that back porch door". Even if it took only... 20 seconds to explain to his sharp mind... still, she would've had to explain it. *Would have had to...* another second conditional.

The Baltic night was clear. It was cold, therefore. Very cold. It seemed to Alison that the night was hardly drifting by, time seemed frozen, as if that particular night in that particular location would never end. That this, now, is reality. Her well read mind clutched at the straws of books once devoured on trains and planes. Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*. Elie Wiesel, *Night*. For a few seconds, Alison recalled what they say about time in Las Vegas casinos, no clocks, people in a dimension outside of time. Whatever. Whatever, "I am alone", Alison traced on the table she sat at. *Ya- odna*. Christadelphian Youth Circle, teenage girls, friends for life. Bob Dylan, "Where, where, where are you tonight?". The haunting melody had always stuck with her. Surrounded by "loving brothers and sisters" later on, after her baptism. Friends at university, but not very deep... because they were "in the world". Mum and dad, and them... who wouldn't talk. Except, maybe, about the weather. "You're *out of fellowship*". "You must understand, Alison, you've *left the Truth*". *No highway*. Nevil Shute. All the money in the world can't buy... friends. Fellowship. "You must realize, Alison, we love you, but, you don't accept Jesus as God, we are like most Christians a Trinitarian church, so, I think you'll understand, we can't accept you as a member". "Or will we leave each other alone like this / On the streets of..." Philadelphia. Riga. London. "Ain't no angel gonna greet me...". On arrival at Gatwick's South Terminal tomorrow. "God willing". Alison rallied herself to try to pray. God... Jesus. Sure, they are there. Just need to see... John Robinson, *The Human Face of God*. Springsteen... can't get him outta my mind... "Just a little of that human touch".

Alison checked her inbox. Nothing there really. A few spam mails. Updates from Yahoo groups discussing Russian stuff, journalism. Thought for the day from some website... about the radical love of Christ. Alison read it with half eager eyes but a glazed mind.

Trying to sleep, her phone rang once. It was a missed call from Dmitry. Suddenly, she was awake and functioning. "02:48" read the digital alarm clock. Just red neon, unfriendly. Alison couldn't bring herself to call him back. She placed her phone under her pillow. Why was he calling so late? He couldn't talk from the dormitory in the night shelter; he must be in the toilets.

Twenty minutes later, her cushioned phone purred gently in her hand. A text. "My last kredit. Forgive me, call me. Have problem now. Want baptizm. I love u".

Alison mused that if it weren't for the comment about baptism, she really would not call him. But maybe... his salvation was in her hands. So God had arranged it. Perhaps. And those last few Santims of credit to send an SMS, maybe... maybe really, this was the last cry of a drowning man. So. Red button. Options. Call. Green button. The automatism of digital life.

“I’m so, so sorry I walked out. I just couldn’t take it. It’s all too much for me. Abdullah. Samuel. You. The need for baptism. Getting beaten up. Memories of the Operation Quartz stuff. Abdullah”, he unconsciously repeated, “But I shouldn’t have done that to you, walking out like that. When we were training, we had to read stuff about how Western people understand us, as Soviets, I mean, as Russians. One of the things we read was that you think we are too suspicious, too into imagining conspiracies, thinking up suspicious theories about people and circumstances. I hated reading it at the time. But... well, I guess, all nations, ethnic groups, have their weak points, and their strong points. And that, maybe, well... not *maybe*, it simply is so, that that’s... one of mine, at least”.

“So where are you now? In the toilets, I guess?”.

“No. I’m outside the bus station. Waiting for the waiting room to open at four a.m.”.

“Oh?”

“I was beaten up badly outside the night shelter as soon as I got there after leaving you. My punishment, for sure, for walking out on you. I’m in... a bad way. Feels like my finger is broken. I made a kind of splint for it and tied it to my finger to keep it straight. But that isn’t the really important thing”.

“Dmitry, I... feel very very much for you, but nobody can go on in a situation like I’m in.”

“I realize that. I do, really. I just... want you to baptize me tomorrow, before you fly to England. Are you in the airport already?”.

“No. I mean, I’m not in the airport. I was gonna go there tomorrow and fly out. Just need to hand back the keys to my apartment. And... well, I’m glad you realize about baptism. But...”

“But what?” Dmitry eagerly interjected.

“But we need to talk. I suppose, yet another coffee together. I could come right now, I suppose. I’m not sleeping. As I guess you know.”

“No no I promise you, I am *not* shadowing you, I don’t even know where you live”.

“No, OK, I believe you, I mean, you are a smart guy and surely you can *imagine*, you can guess, I am not exactly fast asleep tonight”.

“Ah OK”

“Well I don’t really like walking about Riga in the small hours at such low temperatures. Maybe... nine o’clock, somewhere?”.

“OK. And where to do the baptism?”.

“We can talk about that. Maybe a sauna?”.

“Wherever you say. Even, we can go down to the beach at Jūrmala and break the ice and I do it in the sea. You can just stand on the ice and say the words. Maybe just... hold my shoulders”.

“Oh... well, I’d not thought of that. But... let’s talk, OK?”.

“OK, but, when’s your plane? And... look, you realize, I want to be baptized, and I will not ask Samuel, so, it leaves you”.

A plan started to come to Alison; to take Samuel and Beth with her to meet Dmitry.

“OK really don’t worry about my plane. Your baptism *is* important, that’s why I’m calling you back, as well as...”, and Alison’s voice softened against her own will, “as well as that... you really are in a hard situation, I realize that and, well, I... care for you very very much”.

CHAPTER 13

Crossing the Rubicon

It seemed for all the world that it was the usual place, the usual scene, the standard conversation. Like office workers in their break. Both Dmitry and Alison were aware of that as they sat down in Coffee Nation, almost with a business like air to them. Dmitry clearly had suffered the night before, and as he unfroze in the warmth of the coffee house, his hands shook slightly. Dismissing the idea that these might be the shakes of an alcoholic, Alison got down to business very quickly. She had prayed so much for Dmitry to decide for baptism. And she had made his baptism the deciding factor in allowing her feelings for him to stream onwards. Once that step was taken, Alison had concluded, she would feel helpless in controlling her emotions. And here she sat, sleepless, facing Dmitry and his desire for baptism. She had no idea how she would perform it; given his hang-ups about Samuel, she had simply texted Beth and asked her to pray for her today. Some things in life have to be faced alone, she had decided, or at least, with the Lord alone.

“Well I don’t know how ever I am going to do this”, she opened. “I am I suppose the liberated Western female, but the reality is, where I came from in my life, stuff like baptisms and that were done by the men and I... kinda... don’t have a clue how to do it”.

“How to put a guy under water and lift him up again? *Really?* You must’ve seen it done many times”, Dmitry responded with a slight attempt to defuse the tension with some levity.

“Yeah well, the physical bit, sure, of course. But I suppose... I suppose there must be an interview first”.

“An interview? With... whom?” Dmitry asked, with both surprise and suspicion in his voice.

“Oh, it’s just that we used to call it “an interview”, it’s more like a confession of faith”.

“A *confession?*”, Dmitry asked with concern. “Like, I have to tell you all my sins? But, well... well, OK. Why not. Yes, OK, I can see the point of that. Baptism is after all for the forgiveness of sins, so, I guess the person ought to be aware of them as he goes under the water”.

“No no”, Alison smiled, the lines she sometimes paid so much attention to in the mirror visibly springing to life across her tired face. “Not at all. I meant, a confession of faith. The doctrines that you believe, stuff like that”.

“Well, OK... to that too. But you know, Tolstoy’s book, *Ispoved*, “A confession”, he has a go at the big churches, especially Russian Orthodoxy, yes he has a swipe at the Trinity even, all very much our way of thinking about doctrine, he argues very much for personal belief in God, Jesus, and the Bible. *Solo scriptura* kinda stuff, as we’ve talked about before. Have you... read it?”.

“Yes, I have. But as I recall, it’s rather, well, rambling autobiography, about his own struggles with depression, very... personal”.

“*Exactly!*” Dmitry said with evident approval. “And isn’t that what this “confession” before baptism is also to be about? I mean, the doctrines, you know what I believe. We’ve been all over that. But isn’t a confession... personal, about *you*, I mean, in this case, about *me?*”.

“Well sure, I see what you mean”, Alison replied thoughtfully. “But, I really, really don’t want to hear all your sins. I’m not the one. You have to confess that to God. Maybe... Hey!”, Alison waxed enthusiastic, “Why don’t you like write down your... your stuff on a piece of paper, like, this serviette, and then go and flush it down the toilet, it’d be a symbol that through the water of baptism, all that has been flushed away?”.

“Mmm”, Dmitry said reflectively, noticing for some reason that Alison was wearing light lipstick and had powdered her face. “Rather like how Jesus made the pigs go over the cliff, to try to visually help the man see that his past, his “demons”, were all gone to drown in the sea, and he’d have remembered that scene all his life. I remember Samuel... Samuel saying that, when he was explaining how demons don’t really exist, just the language of the day for mental illness being cured. I admit... Samuel did teach me quite a lot”.

Dmitry’s brow furrowed: “But... God needs a person here on earth, to be His, let’s say, representative, to take all this... stuff, this confession. Not a toilet in Coffee Nation. Well, let me re-phrase, OK, *He* doesn’t need any person on earth, but... don’t we just need someone on His behalf to talk to, down here?”

Alison nodded, remembering her feelings of the previous night. Her belief in God tinged with a desire for some... John Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, someone... yes, down here, as Dmitry put it. “Well, OK, I can try... but really, I don’t want to. I can do nothing with those sins. Just...”

“Just baptize me for them, Alison, baptize me into Jesus “for the remission of sins”... that’s what it comes to. But OK, I do also understand, you don’t want to. I also... wouldn’t wish to hear another guy’s sins. I did, once, in Afghanistan... there was a young Christian guy from Moldova, he was in the Red Army against his will, he was badly wounded by a roadside bomb. I sat with him at the end. It was *really really* like Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*. He confessed all his sins. Just by the side of the road, by the time our medics came, it was too late, he’d... gone. I was thinking all the time he was talking, well whispering actually, that it was all... not much really, by my standards. Slept with his girlfriend in some collective farm back where he came from in some village in Moldova, started smoking when he went into the army, fantasized about some woman, masturbated, got drunk once in his life, had gone into the army instead of to prison as a conscientious objector... sure, sins, I guess, but... as I said, by my standards, nothing much. Alison, I have... blood on my hands, actually literally *had blood on my hands*... Abdullah’s father wasn’t the only one... there were four with my own hands, and who knows... whether it was my cartridge, my bullet, with a few others... well who knows, *God* knows... or maybe it was someone else’s... He alone knows... admittedly all from my army time, done in that context, but... all the same. I had affairs too. Not affairs actually, casual stuff. We’d get back to Kabul from assignments, shattered, angry, desperate, and, well, there were our girls working in the logistical departments, treating us like heroes, so, things happened. And... I’ve had a problem with alcohol. But truly I am over that. And now... thanks to you... I even quit smoking. And... well... ha... you didn’t want it, but, I’ve done it...”

“Done what? Quit smoking?”

“Done my confession, the, *sin* bit of it...”.

“That’s good”, Alison said with a similar tone of relief. “So... what about the doctrines? And the first question we were asked... I’m sorry, but I can only do this as we had it done to us, I mean, I have no other... template, let’s say, in mind to follow... the first question we were asked was “Why do you want to be baptized?”. What about that?”.

“Fair enough. Well Jesus died and resurrected, as my representative, not substitute, I really, truly believe it”, Dmitry said eyeballing Alison. “That 2000 years ago or whatever, on a day in April, on a Friday afternoon, on a hill outside Jerusalem, He died... for me. And three days later, rose again. So, I have to... connect with Him as He asked. Then I will be *in* Him, as Samuel keeps saying, a brother in Christ, not just a brother *of* Christ, but *in* Him, counted as Him”.

Alison reflected how “Christadelphian” meant “brethren in Christ”. “That’s great, Dima! You have a really... unusual, powerful, way of putting things. So, you don’t believe in the Trinity?”.

“Nooo”, Dmitry said with a grin. “You know that. Nor that Jesus pre-existed as a person before His birth. I do remember how hung up you were on that bit, when we first met”.

Alison smiled broadly as Dmitry continued: “He was the son, the special son, the seed of Abraham, of David, the one promised right back in Genesis 3:15”.

“Great!”, Alison beamed. “So what can you say about the promises to Abraham?”.

“He was told he would have one son, who’d be Jesus, and yet that son would be as many as the stars, and those people, those many... seeds, would be blessed, and the special son and Abraham would inherit the earth together forever. And... Galatians 3, I think, at the end of one of the chapters in Galatians anyway, it says that all who are baptized into Christ are treated like they are Christ, the special son of Abraham, and so they share the promises, it’s like, the Israelite’s hope becomes ours, eternal life in God’s Kingdom on earth. Which is why, like we agreed before, we have no immortal soul, the hope is eternal life in that Kingdom, which is why if we’re in Christ we’ll be resurrected and judged and then if we... kinda held on in Christ... we’ll live forever in that Kingdom. This earth is ours...”.

Dmitry had been speaking quickly. Very quickly. “Wow. That’s.... *amazing*. That you know it all so well, so clearly, and it’s all bubbling out of you! Like... the runaway train!”.

Dmitry looked like he wanted to clarify what “the runaway train” referred to, but he could guess. “Well, what’s next?”.

“Umm... What’s the Holy Spirit?”.

“The Spirit of God is the power of God, Holy Spirit is when it’s used for... specific objectives” Dmitry shot back, as if he rather liked that phrase “specific objectives”. “And”, he continued almost breathless, “The miraculous gifts of the Spirit, talking in tongues, miracles, rabbits out of hats and that Pentecostal stuff, isn’t true today, was just in the first century”.

Alison was wondering whether miracles really didn’t happen today. But she kept on with the theology: “And... Satan, and all that”.

Dmitry nodded as if taking his cue. But then he broke out into something else: “By the way, Alison, when’s your plane? I guess they always have seats on those flights to London”.

“Don’t worry, Dima. I’m... not going to fly today. Maybe not tomorrow either. I’ve not even got a ticket. Your baptism... would... will... kinda change things”. After a slight pause the ever cautious Alison added: “For the moment”.

“I see. Well, I of course have no ticket for where I am going. I’ll hitch hike to Daugavpils and then, well, tackle the border crossing job late tonight. But it’s best for me to be on the road as early as I can”.

Alison’s eyes widened. He really was set on returning to Russia. Today. Tonight. “Dmitry, please... don’t. Don’t go.... at least, yet”.

“I can’t stay another night in or near the night shelter. It’s -25 if not -30 at night. Even the bus station and the train station are dangerous for me. Maybe I could find a cellar or something, but, not a heated one”.

“Dmitry, please. Let me help you. Somehow I’ll arrange... for you to have somewhere to sleep tonight”. Unashamedly she allowed her desperation to show: “I’ll even get you a room in a hotel, something, somehow, I will arrange. Believe me, Dmitry, you won’t sleep cold tonight”.

Mutually embarrassed by that unintentionally suggestive form of words, both were eager to get back to business.

“So... where were we. Satan?”.

“Satan is a Hebrew word which means “adversary”, there’s no dragon with tail and horns out there, satan can refer to anything which stands against you, like Peter was a satan to Jesus, and the biggest adversary is our own flesh. Sin comes from within us, not from outside us. Angels don’t sin, the word can mean “messenger” and sometimes refers to people who of course, *can* sin”.

“What can I say, wow”.

“Oh, and demon possession, it was just the language of the day for mental illness in the first century”.

“Right”, Alison nodded. “And what’s left... hell?”.

“Hell... the Hebrew and Greek words translated “grave” are also translated “hell”, so hell’s just the grave, no literal place of eternal fire, eternal fire.... is like a metaphor, a symbol, for total destruction”.

“Well, Dima. You’re there, I’d say. What else can I ask you? Of course”, and Alison touched his quivering hand, “this is all just a formality. I *know* what you believe from... a million cups of coffee in these places”.

Dmitry responded to the physical touch with some surprise. “Thanks...”

“For what?”

“For... touching my hand. But... is there anything else? I mean, I’ve decided for baptism. I know you love me. Though, with me walking out last night, the talk of going back to London... I... thought it was a hopeless romance”. Dmitry eyeballed Alison and leaned forward in characteristic style. “But Alison, please, please. Let’s get the baptism done. *Please*. And then... the personal stuff can follow”.

Alison burst into tears. Between her sobs she managed to say to the effect that he was right, and that she too put his baptism as of first priority, that she felt as he did. And that she would not be going to London. No time soon.

Dmitry reached his good hand across the table to her arm. She grabbed his hand, but ended up holding just one of his fingers. Recovering, she tried her best to speak with self-possession: “I have set a kind of barrier in me, maybe wrongly, but it is all the same, about this baptism thing. I cannot let myself go to someone who’s not in Christ. If you are baptized, God knows... really, God knows... what then. I can’t believe... it’s coming true, and you will be baptized now. Then that barrier is gone”. Alison’s sharp, literate mind again came into focus in her words: “It’ll be.... crossing the Rubicon. Know what I mean by that?”.

“Yeah. The insignificant in itself river or stream that was crossed, and then after that Julius Caesar swept all before him in the march to Rome”. Dmitry shrugged: “Military history, it’s why I know it. And even my dumb friend Igor ought to know it, from general knowledge. So yes, very good Alison.... what I love about you, you’re smart. No dumb Westerner. Coz... if baptism equals the Rubicon, well, the Rubicon was water too... a stream”.

“OK, well, let’s go... cross the stream”.

The couple walked silently along Elizabetes Iela, neither asking the other the obvious question “where are we going?”. Coffee Nation had been playing *Summer Night City*, with Alison reflecting that that was about the most inappropriate song for frozen, drab Riga in the Baltic Winter. But grey, frigid Riga started to lighten up. The low temperatures meant clear air, and the sun kept catching on unexpected objects, glinting directly at Alison. The Abba songs in the cafe restimulated Alison’s memory of another one. She had memorized it at 14, to demonstrate to the girls at school that actually she *did* know all about pop music, even though it was strictly banned at home. “I have a dream, a song to sing, to help me cope with anything... If you see the wonder of the fairy tale, You can take the future... I believe in angels, something good in everything I see... I believe in angels, when I know the time is right for me, *I’ll cross the stream...*”. Crossing the Rubicon. This was Dmitry’s song all right.

Her song. *Our* song. The black ice crossing the pedestrian area opposite the station was the worst, treacherous sheet ice. Alison slipped, but in the midst of her “Ohhh!”, Dmitry caught her arm. She tucked her arm into his and grinned up at him. Dmitry grinned back, nervously.

“Don’t be nervous”, Alison boldly said. Some Bible verse came to her mind, that it would be a great sign when “a woman shall compass a man”, took the initiative.

“Well... honey. I’d *love* to put my arm right around you, hug you so close you won’t ever fall on this ice. But... it’s just that... I’m known around here, the railway station. It’s full of *bomzh*, they know me, and jealousy... seeing me with a Western woman like this... it’s enough to kill for. And, whatever, I have to think one step ahead, about where I’ll sleep tonight. Remember... they nearly killed me last night”.

Alison had ignored his bruised upper cheek and lacerated right eyebrow. Reality just slightly obtruded. “Oh... I’m sorry. But really, you’ll be OK tonight. I don’t mean, stay at my place... no. But I *promise*, I’ll get you a hotel. God will make it all work out, let’s just believe that. Well, *I* believe that”.

“I do, too”, Dmitry said. His sober face charmingly broke into a grin as he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him. “All the same, this is hardly the place to... start making out, right on the station square in front of... all Riga”. His face resumed its’ previous seriousness: “And anyway, where exactly are we going?”.

Alison giggled. “Truly, I don’t know. You *really* want to get the train down to Jūrmala and do it in the sea?”. She giggled again at the thought of adding: “Surely going in the sea, breaking the ice at -25, would be pretty cruel on a bloke’s testicles”.

“Well, yeah, must admit, not really. There’s a sauna in the Old Town, you can rent it for a couple of hours, and I’m sure they have a plunge pool we could use”.

“Oh, sure, that’d be *ideal*! You know where it is?”.

The happy but confused couple walked in silence to the Monte Karlo hotel and then up a side street toward the sauna. “We can cut through here” were Dmitry’s only words. *Their* only words. Seeing it was a side street with nobody else much walking in it, Dmitry felt more confident to put his arm around Alison’s waist. After all, she had taken quite a bit of initiative with him, and she seemed to be looking for some acceptive response. “Crossing the Rubicon... a bit before we’ve actually crossed the Rubicon, before we even got our feet wet”, she muttered with a grin.

“Hey, Dimchik” came a voice from far behind them. Dmitry stopped in midstride and removed his hand from Alison’s waist. They both turned to look behind them, Dmitry turning to his right and Alison to her left. From Igor’s viewpoint behind them, it looked almost artistic, ballet-like, the opening of a butterfly. And yet there was the unmistakable body language of surprised guilt, Adam and Eve in Eden, of being unexpectedly sprung.

“The *idiot*”, Dmitry spat out. “It’s Igor, total... *moron*. From the night shelter. The last, the very *last* person we need just now”.

“Oh...” Alison said, for the sake of making a response. “But he’s... OK, isn’t he? You told me about him, the guy you were kind of in with a bit, he’s not gonna beat you up or anything is he?”.

“Oh no no, he’s not the type, he’s just... a total *idiot*. He’ll spread this all over the place now”.

Dmitry had never seen Igor run. He always shuffled around, nodding in agreement with his own wise thoughts or shaking his head in sober disagreement with the latest unwisdom he had observed. And the cobbled street was icy, nobody runs on cobbles and ice. Unless they’re desperate. His puffs of breath hung for brief moments in the freezing air. The seconds they stood there waiting for him to

come near to them were just long enough for Dmitry to nervously shift his weight from one leg to the other.

CHAPTER 14

The Idiot

“The *idiot*”, Dmitry muttered in English very quietly as Igor finally came near.

Clearly Igor was distressed. He threw himself upon Dmitry, totally ignoring Alison, and clutched his shoulders. He peered into Dmitry’s face as he had so often done, but this time with a passionate intensity and urgency. Instead of tapping or motioning with his fingers, Igor kept his hands pressing hard into the lapels of Dmitry’s overcoat.

“I’m so, so sorry”, Igor sobbed. Dmitry had never seen Igor cry. Igor didn’t seem to take life seriously enough to need to weep about anything. He existed, rather than lived, day to day. But clearly there was something else going on, another... aspect to Igor.

Igor repeated again: “Dima, I’m so very, *very* sorry. How can I ever say sorry enough... how can I ever put this right? And you’re such a... a really, *really*, truly good man”.

The Russian classics help us make sense of life, Dmitry recalled being told in his youth. Dostoevsky’s lead character in *The Idiot* was indeed a bit of an idiot in some ways, but in the end, he turned out to be not so stupid.

With real surprise and concern in his voice, Dmitry asked: “Look Igorok, whatever’s the matter? What’s happened?”.

Igor was weeping so much he could hardly speak. The tears started to freeze on his unshaven cheeks. “I’m going... I’m going to Samuel on Sunday. I’m going to be baptized, I’ve repented, really God knows, I’ve repented”.

“Repented of *what*, Igor?” Dmitry enquired, exasperated.

Igor looked a real old man as he stood there. The words caught in his throat so badly that Dmitry wondered if Igor had had some kind of stroke.

“I know... I know they’ve been beating you up. It wasn’t, it *wasn’t me that asked them to*, Dmitry”, and the old man’s tear smeared pupils insisted on connecting with Dmitry’s pitying gaze, “Really it wasn’t, I’m *not like that*, I wouldn’t actually harm anyone”.

“I know, Igor. I know you wouldn’t. So... what happened? What is it all about?”.

It was getting too much for Igor, and the three of them were standing in the middle of a cobbled street in the Old Town, in freezing conditions. Dmitry looked up and down the street. But there was no place to go. “Take your time, Igor. Just take your time”.

“That bollard. That bollard, we both wondered what it was made of, remember?”.

“Yes we did. I was surprised Georgij even wanted it. Didn’t seem real scrap metal”.

“Well, it turned out it was nickel. Russian nickel, from up there in Norilsk. Apparently that bollard was some historical thing, dating back to the time of our Czars here”.

Dmitry nodded slightly at the connection between nickel and Norilsk, Russia, the source of all Soviet nickel. “But *a whole bollard* made of solid nickel? Nickel’s used to *plate* things, I never heard of solid nickel bollards. And anyway, how do you *know* it was nickel? And what... err... how does that affect anything?”.

“Georgij waited for me outside the shelter. He kinda, repented. He said look, I can’t drive past you guys, my kinda brothers, waiting outside the shelter, and know I deceived you. That bollard I told you wasn’t worth much, well I got 220 Lats from the German dealers for it. I told you a much lower figure, so, look, take the rest of the Lats that I didn’t give you. And he pushed the cash into my pocket”.

“And you didn’t tell *me*, you mean? Igor, that’s fine by me. Really brother, it’s fine. It’s... life, but, it’s fine”.

Igor started crying again, vigorously shaking his head in disagreement. “No, no. There’s more, more, more to it than that”. Dmitry could see that there really was.

“You see”, Igor struggled to hold Dmitry’s eye contact, moving his own face to by all means keep that direct connection with him. “You see, there were a whole load of those bollards. And they had all been loosened by some gang of crooks, the big guys, you know, and they were ready to lift them all in one go. Then, we went there and took one of them. Then, apparently, some other guys did the same, just they took three of them. The original gang then started looking for who had lifted the bollards, seeing it was them that loosened the concrete around them bit by bit, and kinda had the idea to do it. So...”

There were more tears and gasping for breath in the biting air.

“So, well, with that fortune in my pocket, I got drunk, with some of the guys from the shelter, and, well, I told them everything. About you and me. I said we only lifted one of the bollards. They started on me the next day and I said no no, honest, I only took one. But they assume you took the other ones, and that you have a few hundred Lats, and that’s why you were spotted in town here with... your chick. Buying her expensive coffees and stuff. And, well, they came and got the boys onto you, the rent a mob boys, you know the ones”.

Dmitry nodded. “I do. But usually those boys, they let you know why you are getting beaten. But they never told me. That was what had me so confused. And, well, scared, to be honest”.

“Yes yes”, Igor earnestly continued. “They’re jealous beyond words. It’s not just that they think you stole their bollards. They think you pocketed a fortune from it, and you’ve not been in the shelter at night because you’re living it up with your Western woman, expensive coffees and that. I’m... so, so sorry I drunk, that I took the money from Georgij, that I told them it was your idea, that you are involved with it”.

“So... the bitter edge to it all is jealousy? I mean, they punished me enough, it seems, for stealing the bollard, *their* bollard, as it were. And the reason I wasn’t in the night shelter at nights... I was... you know, railway station, bus station, wandering the *gulags*, the only reason was... because I knew they were going to beat me up if I came near the night shelter, in fact, if I went anywhere near Maskavas street”.

Igor had released his hold on Dmitry’s shoulders. There was a flash of the old Igor in the way he nodded so knowingly. “I do understand that. I know, you got only ten Lats out of the whole job. And remember that time I gave you a smoke in the waiting room, after they’d beaten you. I... really know”.

“Look Igor, I’m... as you can see”, Dmitry said, half turning toward Alison, “Kinda otherwise engaged. I’m myself... OK now. But don’t beat yourself up, I know you drink, you opened your mouth, these things happen. I, look Igorok, I forgive you, it’s really all OK. And... great you want to be baptized on Sunday! I’m sure Samuel will be pleased. Just... don’t tell him the story, right?”.

“OK. This time, I really *do* promise. And, I really *do*”, and the trademark tap on Dmitry’s chest very nearly came through, “I really *do repent*”

“Of what? What... do you mean?”.

“Well, of the whole thing, but specifically, of rolling that smoke in Bible paper, joking that India paper, Bible paper, is just the best for rolling smokes in. That was... *awful*. An *awful* sin. I even don't know, can God forgive me for *that*”.

Alison, in the spirit of her new friend Beth, burst in positively: “Sure, Igor. That's just great you want to be baptized, and have repented of... stuff. No sin, nothing, nothing at all can... stand in the way of God if He wants to save you... and, of course, He *wants* to save you”.

“OK thanks madam for the encouragement”, Igor said with a slight bow. He took Alison's hand and kissed it. “I... *meant* that”, he added, fearful he would be misunderstood.

“I know you did”, chorused Alison and Dmitry at the same time. Igor seemed strangely touched at that chorus of coincidence. He verged again on his old knowing nodding of the head: “I know, you're busy... maybe you'll be there Sunday again? I'd... especially like you to be at my baptism, whenever Samuel will arrange it”.

Noting the awkward silence, Igor pressed fervently: “You *will* be, won't you?”.

“Well, sure”, Alison responded, as Dmitry looked into the middle distance whilst nodding his head silently.

Igor concluded: “I'm going to *really* pray for you two, you deserve... everything. Me- nothing. But you... every, every single, happiness, blessing”.

Alison kissed him on each of his tear frozen cheeks, and Dmitry gave him a strong bear hug.

Alison and Dmitry walked on down the street toward the sauna. Alison commented: “Something... didn't seem one hundred percent... *right* there, did it”.

Dmitry hugged her shoulder again and pressed it with some sense of urgency to be understood: “No Alison, believe me on this one. I know I've been wrong in my reading of situations, I accept that, but no, there was the total, absolute ring of truth about all that. Jealousy is bitter as death, Song of Solomon says. And amongst *bomzh*, well it really is the case. You can be killed for... jealousy. Putting everything together again, yes, this is the case. And Igor... well, he's simple enough to know when he's telling the truth and when he isn't. I'm sorry for calling him an idiot... he's just a normal guy, slightly below average intelligence but not an idiot”.

“Well, OK”, Alison responded acceptively. “But... is that the explanation for the gunman coming to me? Seems they were shadowing us, ha. What goes around comes around. We shadowed Samuel, and we got shadowed. They know your connection with me. The guys that beat you, beat me, as it were. Or, wanted to, or, plan to. And is it connected, do you think, to Beth saying that Samuel has a hard time with... well, underworld characters?”.

Dmitry raised his eyebrows and nodded, turning to catch Alison's eye as he replied. Their eyes caught just for a moment as they turned toward each other whilst walking forward. “Well, looks like it. As to Samuel, I don't know. The jury's still out on him, so far as I'm concerned. But yes, obviously, there's got to be a connection with your problem. It's just...”. Dmitry shook his head and slowed to a halt in order to look Alison right in the eye: “It's just... *crazy* to me, that jealousy can go that far, to shadow a guy, to maybe even kill or threaten to kill his... well, OK, his woman”.

Alison glowed at that comment, although realizing that Dmitry may have meant that they would've *perceived* her to be “his woman”. “Well, jealousy... I saw that as the main reason for so much of the hatred, the religious hatred and division, which plagued my life back in England. It's a powerful thing... as you say, cruel as the grave. And “for jealousy they delivered Him”, I mean, Jesus; that was the reason for the crucifixion. I mean, you know, humanly, from a human point of view”.

“Yeah, yeah”, Dmitry nodded in instant understanding and agreement. “Yes, it was a reason for His death. So... yes, it could be so”.

The sauna was a seedy establishment. The woman at reception looked them up and down and suggested ten Lats for two hours. Including clean sheets and towels, and a 20% discount from the bar. “Is there a pool, and, like, is it working? I mean, filled with water?”, Dmitry enquired. The woman looked at him whimsically as if to say “I’ve heard and seen it all, and you all pay for two hours and are out after one”. She invited them to take a look, as she confessed to being uncertain as to what exactly Dmitry had in mind regarding the pool. Ten Lats gave the right to a kind of apartment. A room with hot stones and a plunge pool outside it, and a lounge with a couch and clean sheets. With fading red decor. Alison, Dmitry and the apparently disinterested woman had a look at the facilities. Sure, there was a plunge pool. With a used condom floating on the surface. “There were condoms, I mean condoms for use, in the toilets, too”, Alison whispered to Dmitry in English.

“I don’t kinda... feel right about this place, Alison”, Dmitry said uneasily. “It is, after all, the most important moment of my life”.

Alison warmly agreed, thrilled with his attitude. They re-emerged into the side street, fobbing off the suddenly interested woman who was now offering them a lower price for two hours. Alison squeezed Dmitry’s arm: “I can’t tell you, Dima, how it... touches my heart that you have just the same view about baptism, *your* baptism, as I have. You’re right, that wasn’t the right place. For us. Do you know any other saunas? What about a public swimming pool?”.

As they discussed possibilities, Alison’s phone rang. Her eyes sparkled playfully towards Dmitry as she looked at the name of the caller before deciding to answer: “It’s my work, the office. I don’t need to answer it... work can wait!”. But Alison recalled all the missed calls from Ilze the previous evening. Maybe there really was something they needed from her. For some reason. “Wait, Dima, I’d better answer it”.

“Sure, sure. I’ll psyche myself up for the Baltic and breaking the ice. Maybe it’ll come to that”.

Alison clicked the happy looking green reply button with her fingernail.

“Hello, Alison. This is Erich here, Erich Keller, from the office”.

“Hi Erich. You doing OK?”.

Erich’s business like German manner and accent came through strongly in how he spoke English: “Alison, err, there’s a very major problem here at the office. You’re required to come here immediately. It’s very important. Within an hour or so, because...”.

Alison was angry, and Dmitry observed that anger with interest: “Listen, Erich. I am freelance, I don’t work for you, I have no obligation to you. You’ve never spoken to me like this before, and I hope never will do again. I’m not *required* by you to be at your beck and call, your command, to come to that office within an hour. Today is *such* a significant day for me in my personal life and I’m sorry, I won’t be coming in. If you like, I’m on vacation and perhaps...”.

Erich had been trying to interrupt but to no avail. But finally Alison realized that all his grave “But Alison the situation is that...” type interjections might just possibly be about something important. She fell silent as he continued. She beckoned to Dmitry to put his head near hers, just as they had when spying on Samuel. She clicked the “loudspeaker” option on her telephone. If there was any reason to interrupt the baptism, Dmitry had to hear it firsthand.

“The situation here in the office is that we are all under arrest”, Erich announced. “The Police are here, they have a full list of the names and details of all who are associated with us. I am speaking with Police officers on both sides of me. There’s no point running to the airport or over a border, the border guards are informed that you’re a wanted person. I am calling you Alison to urge you

personally, as someone who knows you, and your immediate... let's say "boss", as it were... that I strongly advise you to co-operate fully with the Police investigation. The quicker you come, the better, otherwise your refusal to co-operate will be interpreted as suspicious; otherwise an arrest warrant will be put out for you by this evening. And... for sure, the Police know your address. So please, let's try to work through this. I'm sure truth will out in the end. I suggest you hang up this call, leave your phone switched on, and allow the Investigating Officer to call you. Hope to see you soon".

With characteristic abruptness, Erich hung up.

CHAPTER 15

Crime and Punishment

Alison and Dmitry stood in silence a few meters from the sauna entrance. No hugs. Dmitry was the first to speak, in frustration tinged with anger: “I don’t think God is saying ‘no’ to my baptism. I am totally convinced this is the right thing. But I... well, I am *not* angry with God, but sometimes, you know, you want to shake your fist at... well, not God, but... someone... something.... Divine.... because life seems just too cruel sometimes”.

Alison fiercely nodded. “Like that Russian saying, I walked out to a date, and stepped in some... dog poo”.

“Too right. Exactly. Look, maybe you’ve not got long. I want to come with you. Even though obviously they’re likely to arrest me. And, well, maybe Igor got it wrong. I’ve been breathing sighs of relief that it’s not the Operation Quartz stuff, but you know... maybe it is. So I want to come with you, “to prison and to death”, you know, as Peter said. But... I want to be baptized. Can’t get baptized in prison”.

“You think they’ll put me in *prison*?” Alison exclaimed, “on a purely trumped up charge?”.

“Well.... I hope not. At least, you must have a trial first. Even in Latvia they must agree that. But... arrest warrant? They’d only keep you in prison pre-trial if they really reckon you’re a big time crook, murderer and that”.

Alison admitted her feelings frankly to Dmitry: “I’ve never, *ever*, been so scared. That I’ve been set up for some serious crime, and now I must go and... be charged for it, suffer for it... be put in a woman’s prison for years...”. After more silence, including silent prayer, fighting for self-control and with quivering voice, Alison spoke as if pronouncing a verdict: “Well, my considered opinion is that... oh, wait, Dima, let’s just pray, I mean, pray together”. Alison spoke a simple prayer requesting wisdom and protection. “Well as I was saying, my considered opinion is that I came to this country for one reason only, and that was that you should be baptized. So, Dima, I want you to put that first. I know, you’re the... you’re the real man, you really are, you want to be with me, and more than anyone else on earth, I want *you* to be with me now. But please, Dima, let’s trust in God and put *Him* first. Look... here’s some money”.

Alison opened her purse, removed some banknotes, and handed them to Dmitry. “I want you to go to a sauna, even that seedy one, and baptize yourself. Imagine, if you wish, that I’m doing it”. Alison’s voice then changed to a distinctly more insecure tone: “Maybe it really is so that a woman shouldn’t do a baptism. Maybe God... has plans for us... and He knows it’s best I don’t baptize you”.

Dmitry looked at Alison as if looking both at her and at something beyond her: “I did also wonder about whether you as a woman should baptize me”. Eyes coming into total focus upon her, Dmitry continued more concretely and less abstractly: “But I really don’t think that’s an issue. Who baptizes, who puts the shoulders under the water, as we’ve been saying, is irrelevant. But... for me to do it alone, it’s *so* hard for me to believe that that is OK. But I also need to be baptized. Today. Right now, in fact. Because it’s obvious, plain as daylight, cold as ice, that you’ve been set up and the people who’ve done that are the ones who are trying to, well, murder me. So, we’re in it together”. Dmitry shook his head, swivelling it far further than usual: “But... the jealousy, the madness of it, is beyond me. Why *ever* would some jealous bunch of crooks, some gang, go to all this trouble? Anyway, they have, and it’s a matter of time before they get me. The sensible thing for me to do is to get out of Riga this minute. Every minute counts, humanly. But... I want to put God first. I’ll go back to the sauna, OK, baptize myself. If I can... And then, well I’ll...”. Dmitry broke into tears but quickly held himself together, knowing time was of the essence: “Alison, I love you with all, all of my heart. I know, I’m a

bomzh. I have nothing. I landed you in all this, indirectly, because it was those who are after me who are after you... you... are actually *all* I think about. Any reserve on my side in all this was because I wanted to put the baptism first, in that I *so, so* respect you, and agree with you. And secondly... I'm a *bomzh*, nothing at all. But like I'm prepared to accept God's grace... so, well, I was happy to accept yours, but maybe... well, who knows... maybe, He has other plans. But my heart, from my side... you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do, so so much... I know what you are saying. Your heart's with me, as mine is with you, but God may have other plans, or... might want to kinda... delay things".

"We've gotta move, Dima. Here", Alison opened her purse again, "take all the cash I've got. I'll pull some from the wall. God really bless you. Oh, and make sure your phone is kept switched on, keep it charged..."

To any observer in Zirgu Iela, the French kissing was inevitable. It had to be. "You're beautiful, Alison. I thought you were just... out of this world, the first time we spoke... God bless you, God bless... us".

The memory of the taste of Dmitry's saliva, the rubbing of his unshaven face against her, the slight case of stubble trouble she now had, coupled with the urgency to get to the office and know her fate... was sending Alison's mind and feelings in too many directions at once. She strode purposefully through the streets of the Old Town. An older man irritated by her fast walking turned around to watch the wake of this young business woman in such a hurry. He was fascinated, even concerned, to see her pull to one side of the pavement on Greciniķu Iela and stand stock still for some moments in an empty bicycle parking stand, with her head looking down at the ground and her hands clasped in front of her. And then she hurried on. Maybe, she reflected, Samuel hadn't just been weeping in the breaks. Maybe, praying too.

Alison approached her office building with deep foreboding but characteristic courage and prayerfulness. She realized she had no money. She'd given all her banknotes to Dmitry. There was a SEB Bankomat on the corner, not far from where she had first met Dmitry. Strange... how life goes in circles. The biting cold was paralyzing her fingers, and she attempted to retrieve her purse and extract her bank card with her gloves still on. But after some fumbling, she gave up, resigning to the cold, and inserted the bank card slowly into the slit. 500 Lats / day maximum cash withdrawal. She took it all. Who knows, in this corrupt land... 500 Lats was a good salary for a year for some. And maybe... a month's wages for a senior policeman. "All in God's hands", she thought as she put her own frozen hand back inside its glove. "And do you get gloves in prison... is it warm in the cells?". As she returned her purse to her handbag, imagining how her handbag would look on a table inside some prison reception centre, her phone went off. More fumbling to get at it. No mobile phones in prison, at least, not legally. They say... they smuggle them in.

'Erich work' was the name on the screen.

"Yes, Erich".

"Alison, I'm sorry for spooking you, I mean, they spooked me", Erich said quickly, with uncharacteristic speed and earnestness. "They, the Police, I mean, but, well, it really *is* important, really Alison, *please* come, as soon as... as soonest", his otherwise perfect English stalling for a slight moment. "Where are you? Can you come quickly?"

"I'm right outside the office. Few seconds, I'll be there".

"OK, we're waiting".

The pressure relief wasn't total within Alison. She stopped in the silent stone stairwell and texted Dmitry. "Seems all may be OK, don't panic xxx".

And whilst stopping to text, she prayed again, for Dmitry to be baptized, for God to be with her, with them.

Erich opened the office door and courteously beckoned her inwards. Four men in Police uniform were there. Each with five stars on their lapels. They were senior. And a nervous looking younger guy with one star clutching a laptop. Erich drew up a seat for her. "Your passport or ID documents, please", one of the men said with passionless officialdom. "Firstly, we wish to confirm your identity. All proceedings will be recorded". The nervous young man walked over to Alison and fumbled to fix a lapel mic to her coat. "Maybe take your coat off", one of the men suggested. Alison did so, hanging it on the coat rack, noticing her umbrella still standing there. The young man again fixed the lapel mic, this time to her blouse. His hands were shaking. "*Strada?* Working? One of the men asked the younger man". The youngster returned to his laptop. "Yes sir".

"All proceedings will be recorded, and you must realize what you are saying will be used in criminal proceedings. Please state nothing but the truth. Please sign your agreement here", the Officer said as he handed her a document, "Please take your time to read it carefully before signing, and ask if you have any questions about the text of the document". Alison signed, resolving to be honest but praying God would help Dmitry get baptized.

"So, we can begin. Please state your full personal and business connections with Ilze Dabolina".

Having stated her connections with Ilze, one officer probed Alison further:

"Please can you answer specifically the following questions about Ilze Dabolina's sexual behaviour and preference. In your opinion, how would you classify Ilze Dabolina- lesbian, or heterosexual?"

"Lesbian", Alison answered.

"What is your sexual orientation?"

"Heterosexual".

"Did you at any time engage in a romantic, lesbian relationship with Ilze Dabolina?"

Alison paused just slightly. "No, I did not".

"Do you have reason to believe that Ilze Dabolina was in any sense attracted to you romantically?"

"Yes, I do".

"Did you reciprocate her attentions?"

Again Ilze paused. "No, not really. We just went for coffees".

"Are you currently in a relationship?"

"Yes"

"With whom?"

"A man called Dmitry".

"Dmitry who?"

Alison blushed. "I... don't know his family name. It's not a... sexual relationship. We just... meet and talk about things".

"Where does he live?"

“In Maskavas street, Riga”.

“Which number?”

Again Alison paused so wishing she didn't have to give the shameful answer: “207”.

“The... night shelter for men, correct?”.

“Yes”.

“Have you any reason to think that Ilze Dabolina was jealous that you did not return her lesbian affections towards you?”.

Alison shrugged. “Hard to say. But possibly, yes. But... I think she got over it”.

“Have you had any unusual incident in your life over the last month, incidents which threatened or affected your personal safety?”.

Alison explained in detail the incident with the gunman, with the officers listening carefully, careful not to exchange looks with each other- as they would've been trained, Ilze still had room in her brain to muse.

“Do you have any reason to believe that persons known to you were behind that incident?”

“No”, Alison replied with slightly more confidence than she felt.

“Do you believe Ilze Dabolina was involved in the incident?”

“I have no idea who was behind it. I have no suspicions about Ilze”.

“Do you believe that the gentleman you named as Dmitry was involved in the incident?”.

Alison so wished she didn't have to answer that question: “No, I don't”.

Another officer cut in: “But he's a... how to say in your language... homeless person in a night shelter, what is known here as a *bomzh*. Are you certain he had no connection?”

Alison knew she must be careful: “I have no idea who did it, or who was behind it. So far as I know, Dmitry was uninvolved in it”.

The officers were expressionless, trained, no doubt, Alison reflected, to be like that. Another one took up the interview: “Please explain to us in detail your movements over the last 24 hours”.

Alison explained accurately and without emotion exactly what had happened, with the officer prompting and seeking clarification on some points.

Another officer lifted his index finger. The officer asking the questions nodded towards him, granting permission for him to ask independent questions:

“You spent time with a Samuel and Beth. Were these people known to Ilze Dabolina?”.

“I don't know, but I don't think so”.

“Are you aware if this couple had experienced anything unusual or threats recently?”.

Alison paused again, careful with her words. “The woman, Beth, mentioned to me that her husband had some problems with people, but I really don't know”.

The officers, for all their lack of emotion, couldn't disguise their interest. They probed Alison carefully on this point, but she had no further help for them, no matter how hard they tried to elicit the

non-existent information from her. In similar vein they betrayed a clear interest in any possible link between Ilze and Samuel.

It seemed things were drawing to a close when one officer raised his index finger, and without being directly looked at by the leader of the pack, was given permission by a grunt to go ahead:

“What was your impression of Beth’s sexual orientation?”.

“Heterosexual”, Alison replied immediately and confidently.

“Are you certain that there was no connection apparent to you between her and Ilze Dabolina?”.

“No... I mean, I am certain the two people aren’t connected”.

“May I remind you, madam, that you are giving legal testimony. Would you like to answer that question again?”

Alison looked slightly taken aback at being indirectly called a liar. “I repeat, I am certain the two people aren’t connected”. She knew they were being provocative only to watch her reaction, as to whether she’d passionately object to having her testimony questioned. And so she continued as, she supposed, they would like to hear: “I really don’t know what you’re driving at, but, as I’ve made clear, I am unaware of any connection between Samuel and Beth, and Ilze”.

Another officer raised his index finger and got the grunt to go ahead, with the men careful still to avoid eye contact with each other:

“To return to Dmitry. What is his connection with Ilze Dabolina?”

“None at all, so far as I know”.

“Have you observed Ilze Dabolina at any time apart from when you were at work together?”.

“Yes”, Alison said, knowing that she was going to be asked for details.

“Can you recall where and when? We appreciate giving precise times and even dates may be difficult”.

After several attempts, Alison managed to get the dates right for when she had noticed Ilze near one of the coffee shops in which she had met Dmitry; and the time the previous Sunday when she’d noticed Ilze in the park near Samuel’s church. Again the officers pressed Alison for any possible connection between Samuel, Beth and Ilze. Alison noted, although fearing she was clutching at straws, that there was no revisiting much of anything connected with Dmitry.

“When did you last have contact with Ilze?”.

“Well yesterday, Ilze called me five times, my phone was switched off so I didn’t answer her”.

Three of the officers broke their rule of never exchanging eye contact with each other whilst interviewing. There was a look of slight wonder in those eyes which their raised eyebrows exposed. The officers asked for her phone and noted the times of the calls. Clearly they felt they were on to something. “She was lucky”, one of the men whispered, unprofessionally.

“Please account again for your movements of the last 24 hours”.

Alison repeated herself without contradiction.

“Your... partner, Mister Dmitry, was with you in the cafe. Did he seek to harm you?”

“No, not at all”

“Was his behaviour at all suspicious, or connected in any possible way with Ilze Dabolina?”.

Alison shrugged and raised her eyebrows, pretending to be carefully considering the question and trawling her memory banks: “No, I don’t think really he has *any* connection with Ilze, and no, his behaviour wasn’t suspicious, just, quite normal”. Alison was aware that having told a lie, her body language would likely reflect it. For after all, Dmitry had indeed walked out on her and disappeared into the night, abruptly and strangely, and then called her in the very early hours. Of that morning. It’s just that it didn’t seem criminal to Alison, and she didn’t want to get Dmitry into trouble along with this obviously guilty Ilze. And Dmitry... was worth lying for.

Another officer raised his index finger.

“I understand that you as a citizen of the United Kingdom came to work here in Latvia as a journalist. Correct?”

“Yes”

“Did you know Ilze Dabolina or... mister Dmitry, before you came to Latvia? Were you in contact with them in the United Kingdom?”

“No, I met them only after I had come over here”, Alison replied immediately.

“There are push and pull factors involved in such a decision to relocate. What were your push factors? Why did you leave your own country to come here?”.

Alison paused. “There were no real push factors, just, I fancied something new”. She then realized that she had been moving her right foot nervously. And they had noticed. She sensed the four pairs of eyes boring into her, each seeking her eyeball.

“There must have been *some* push factors. Are you sure you can’t remember any?”.

Alison realized it was best to be totally honest. She explained her disfellowship, her divorce, how it had affected her so deeply. The men seemed disinterested in her actual story but satisfied they had teased something out of her, however irrelevant it was. And thankfully, Alison reflected, her slight mistake on that point had covered her lie about Dmitry.

CHAPTER 16

The Sauna on Zirgu Street

The officers went into the conference room and spoke quietly amongst themselves for what seemed an eternity. Alison, Erich and the young man doing the recording remained in the office. The noise of the door handle turning as they re-emerged into the office seemed to continue for more seconds than it really was.

The senior officer offered Alison his hand. Alison stood and shook it. In almost 19th Century British colonial style, he bowed slightly towards her. "I wish to apologize for the unpleasant experience this has all been for you, madam. And on behalf of Latvia I apologize for the behaviour of one of our citizens, Ilze Dabolina. I also congratulate you on your good luck yesterday". He released her hand and motioned for her to be seated, and then continued:

"Understandably, you will have many questions. We appreciate that, and so I wish to bring you up to speed on the case concerning Ilze Dabolina. The recording is still running, and you are welcome to make any further incidental testimony which may occur to you at this time".

"Thank you" Alison replied, with evident relief.

"We have been investigating the murders of six women in Riga over the last few months. Each of them had had some connection with Ilze Dabolina. We began shadowing Ilze Dabolina and observed her following, shadowing, various women. Most of these women were either lesbians or had been the focus of this woman's romantic attentions. She suffered, she now admits, from a chronic jealousy obsession. She would follow them, often without any particular purpose, and then use a Latvian criminal, Aigars Kalniņš, to firstly give them a warning- just like what you had- and then to liquidate them, by that I mean to murder them, always at or near their homes, and always on a Sunday. We took Ilze Dabolina into custody in the early hours of this morning, and she has cooperated fully with us and admitted to all this in sworn testimony. Yesterday, you were very very lucky. The missed calls you noticed from her were to lure you to your death. She would have entered your apartment with her friend and then shot you. She has admitted this. But you weren't at home for some reason, and you didn't return her calls".

Ilze in custody "in the early hours of this morning". That was exactly when Dmitry had called her.

"And the gunman, Aigars, where is he? Is he still free?".

There was a silence as the senior officer looked to the other three for some guidance. "Umm..." he murmured as he looked at the others. "Can we...?".

Alison felt her whole planet was balanced on a pinhead. Dmitry was surely this gunman, going under a Latvian name. "May it not be, God, God, may it not be" Alison prayed with the greatest intensity she had ever prayed.

The other three shrugged and nodded to their senior officer's unspoken question.

"No, he is not. We took him into custody together with Ilze Dabolina. It's just that he refuses to cooperate with our enquiry, although he clearly is guilty. So... that was why I was unsure whether I was permitted to tell you about his... current status. But of course I understand your fear. So, you can rest assured. He was arrested in the early hours of this morning and is safely in custody. He... won't harm you, and so far as we know he acted alone. So... do you have anything else to add?".

All Alison wanted was to baptize Dmitry. “Err... no, not really. I don’t think I have much else to add. Oh... apart from, will I have to appear in court and testify to all this? Am I free to... go to England, to leave Latvia?”

“You are completely free to do as you wish. There is enough evidence against Ilze Dabolina on her own admission. Actually, your testimony may just be used in an incidental manner. Your testimony today will probably be enough. But you are free”.

Noticing Alison’s doubt, the officer repeated: “Really, you are free!”.

“So... I can, like, I can go now?”.

“Yes”.

“Well, ummm.... thank you for your professionalism and for it seems doing a good job”. All Ilze’s stuff about how corrupt the Latvian Police were was now understandable. And largely nonsense, probably; these guys really did seem very professional.

The men nodded with slight pride.

Alison seemed stunned, unable to move. The senior officer motioned to the young man to stop recording. His expressionless face came to life. “Really Alison, it’s all OK. You’re free, free to do as you wish, to go, to fly, to... do as you wish”. He smiled compassionately at her and sought to break the stress with a joke: “You know, there was a joke from Soviet times, a bit of a *Russian* joke, and about Russian women, but you some sort of remind me of it. There were two Russian women locked up by Stalin...”. The other officers smiled slightly as they obviously knew the joke that was coming. “They were in the same tiny cell for 20 years, then they were released. They stood outside the prison in the freezing cold after their release, talking to each other. For hours, in the freezing Siberian cold. The guards came out and said “Go, women, you are now free”. They turned to him and said “Yes OK OK”, like, keep your hair on, “We’re just having a really interesting conversation””.

Alison smiled weakly. The officer explained: “I know, you’ve not been talking much, you’re not like those Russian women, you know, we Latvians joke that Russian women can talk non-stop for 20 years, but anyway, sorry if the joke wasn’t quite relevant, point is... you are free, to fly, to do as you wish, really!”.

Alison laughed nervously and took her leave of them and Erich.

“Free... to do what I want... to fly...” Alison giggled to herself as she walked down the stone stairs. But on the landing, she stopped. Tears overcame her, like a wave struggling for an entrance somewhere and succeeding. The Russian cleaner lady came out to her from her cubby hole and hugged her. Alison felt she *loved* Russian people. She was a real fat, cuddly *babushka*. “Deary, deary, all will be OK... even if you lost love, it’s OK, you are so pretty, you will find someone, and if it’s money or people being nasty... *there’s a God above*, He knows”. Alison cried into the folds of the lady’s neck. She thought of the joke the officer had cracked. Latvians are good, too. They even like the Russians, they joke about them kindly and fondly. Not nastily, when in fairness, they have their reasons to be bitter with them.

The clear air outside enhanced Alison’s feeling that everything sparkled. She stopped outside the entrance and called Dmitry.

“It’s all OK! I’ve got *all* the answers now! It’s OK! And have you done the baptism yet?”.

“No”, Dmitry replied. “But I’m so glad all is OK”.

“Where are you?”

“In the sauna. I did what you said. But I am still here, didn’t do the baptism”.

“I’ll be there in five minutes if I run. Dima, I’m *so* happy, all is good, *so* good, all is now clear about everything!”.

“And about Abdullah too?”.

“Well look, we’ll talk soon... just wait there OK?”

“OK”.

Alison walked fast towards the sauna, opting not to run because of the icy streets. She stopped to pray at the very place she had prayed on her way to the office. But the words didn’t flow much, beyond “Father, thank You...”.

The suspicious woman greeted Alison coldly and lead her to the sauna apartment. She knocked first before opening the door, and then ushered the panting Alison in, before walking away with raised eyebrows reminding them that Dmitry had paid for only two hours, and she would be knocking at the door five minutes before time was up.

Alison started to tell Dmitry what had happened. “But really, we ought to pray first before I go on”. Dmitry eagerly nodded. “I already was starting to pray, well, give thanks to God, even as you were speaking”. They prayed, and it seemed normal to hold hands. Milliseconds after the “Amen”, Alison asked with concern: “But you didn’t do the baptism?”.

“No, I didn’t. I’ll explain later. Don’t worry, I want to be baptized, even today”. Alison’s face muscles relaxed. “It was me and my problem about doing it on my own. Let’s talk later about that, but, ladies first... you tell me the situation. Basically, do I need to be leaving Riga right now, I mean, soon? If so, do the baptism, I mean, you baptize me, and I’ll go”.

“No, no. You don’t need to leave Riga right now, neither do I”, Alison smiled. And then launched into a recounting of what had happened.

Dmitry nodded and shook his head a few times in amazement as Alison recounted the situation.

“Well I used to think I was good at judging situations, good at joining the dots, seeing the picture on people. But the last while, since meeting you, I realize... my humanity. My frailty. None of us is *so* smart. I guess we’re... trying to discern God’s hand at work, who can do that, His ways are... what does Paul say in the English Bible there in Romans... past finding out?”.

“You *do* sound like Paul in Romans” Alison commended, but continued with the story. At the end, she marvelled again at how Ilze and her gunman had shadowed her on Sunday, and how she had seen Ilze in the park that morning. Dmitry was evidently deeply affected by this. “You see what was happening? God alright. We were shadowing Samuel, and you... we... maybe... were being shadowed. By real murderers.

“Mmmm... I’d not quite thought of that enough”, Alison admitted. “What goes around comes around. Measure for measure. Crime and punishment. Like we said before. But was what we did, shadowing Samuel, a... sin, that as it were came back upon us?”.

“No”, Dmitry replied confidently. “It wasn’t. What goes around comes around” said Dmitry as he drew a circle in the air. “Because this second circle, the bit that “comes around”, is bad, is evil, doesn’t mean that the first bit of the circle, what we did, is necessarily bad”.

Alison nodded in silence. “Very... very... what’s the word... observant, Dima”.

“Oh, I just made that up now”, Dmitry shrugged. “Guess for us two it’s a steep learning curve right now. But...”, and Dmitry’s face contorted, “with me, I really *did* do bad, did evil, murdered, left that Abdullah kid without a daddy, and... it never quite came around to me. Yet”.

“Maybe it never will”, Alison said hopefully, in the spirit of Beth.

“If it doesn’t”, Dmitry said earnestly, his words slightly echoing in the sauna apartment, “Then really, that *is* God’s grace. But as I’ve told you, me driving over landmines and stuff, I’m coming to see that actually, you may be right. Maybe really God counts us as if we never sinned, and so the consequence of sin, at least in its, kinda, ultimate sense, doesn’t come to us”.

The dripping of a tap into the sauna plunge pool lead both Dmitry and Alison to the same word, the same theme, but they sat in an awkward silence until Dmitry spoke the words: “God counts us like that of course if we’re baptized”.

Alison looked directly at him and nodded. “You know Alison, I feel God as it were counted me as if I were baptized before I was. And so, really, I *must* be baptized. It’s already more than time. He’s been *so* patient with me”.

“So why... why didn’t you do it here, whilst I was at the office?”

Dmitry looked ashamed. “I, as you can see, paid the money for this sauna, and I sat here and prayed. I had, actually, a very spiritual experience. I find with prayer that I can’t sustain it for more than ten minutes at a time, in fact... I think I never prayed in one go for more than ten minutes at a time, maybe fifteen minutes was my max”.

Alison once again nodded: “I can *totally* relate to that, Dima. I’m the same. Mind wandering in prayer, it’s... one of my spiritual problems. Or simply, getting sleepy”.

“Well anyway, pretty well all the time I’ve been here, I was praying to God. About, my sins, about Abdullah. But maybe I just kept at it because my inner fears were that I would have to baptize myself when I finished the prayer. And I just, Alison, I just can’t do it on my own. I know, Biblically and that, there’s no reason why a person can’t, why I can’t. I know. But... please, bear with me... it’s my weakness. Nobody’s maybe, let’s say, perfect... well what I mean is, that this is my weakness, my weak point, and I... I ask God, and Jesus, and you... to be patient with me in it. And, well Alison, please... baptize me. Will you?”.

Alison listened for a few precious seconds to the tap dripping into the pool.

“Well I have my problems too, with me doing it. Now... it comes to it. Partly because of my upbringing, that a man should do the baptisms, I mean, a brother; partly because maybe I’ve invested baptism with maybe too much, how to say... made it too much of a kind of... sacrament... in my own mind... like, feeling the water is somehow holy. I know, all those reasons are nonsense, non-reasons. But I, like you Dima, I just can’t quite bring myself to do it, now we’re... here”.

The two sat in silence. The tap seemed to be dripping slower now.

“And there’s one more thing, perhaps the obvious, Dima”.

“Not obvious”, Dmitry smiled. “What is that one more thing?”.

“Well”, Alison blushed slightly, “We’re here in a sauna apartment, with clean sheets and a condom provided for us on the couch there. You undress to your underpants, I undress, I mean, I’m not going in there fully dressed and then walking around the streets of Riga soaking wet at -20, I have no other clothes with me. Me baptizing you in my bra and knickers... No. And... I want your baptism to be... holy, special. Remember it has huge, let’s say, personal significance for me as well as you. I don’t want it to be... clouded... clouded by *anything* human”.

Dmitry gave one of his sober nods of agreement. “When you spoke about the “obvious” issue, well, that was what I immediately guessed but I... played dumb on that one. I’m a hot blooded male and all that, it came to me in an instant but, I didn’t like to say it... I wondered if you were above those thoughts, I mean, you’re... some kinda Angel to me... but of course, you’re human too... fortunately”.

he concluded with a grin. But then he continued: “You can just say the words, you don’t need to be in the water with me... but then I always imagined baptism as someone dipping me, someone... baptizing me”.

“Me too” Alison said immediately, once again totally sharing Dmitry’s line of thought.

“Well”, Alison said, “Talking about joining the dots, as you like to say”, she said, smiling fondly at Dmitry, “Now we understand my gunman problem, we understand you getting beaten up, the Operation Quartz stuff isn’t an item, and, well, for me at least, Samuel’s an honest guy, enigmatic, yes, but not connected with my gunman or your getting beaten up. Why don’t we just go to him and explain all this from start to finish and ask him to baptize you immediately. I think he’d do it, and I think none of this stuff would phase him, nor Beth, they’ve seen a lot of... non-standard stuff in their lives. That much is obvious”.

Dmitry looked distinctly undecided, as if on a fence of decision. “I guess there’s nobody else but him. But OK, we get a taxi to his place, and what if God, you know, stops us again, as He did, well, this afternoon?”.

“That would be... God’s will. I’m sure He wants you to be baptized... and I’m sure He’s sensitive to our... our hang-ups”.

“I agree on those two points. I do believe the same about God in this... context”.

“So, let’s call a taxi and go there. Well, pray first, and... call a taxi?”.

“Of course Alison, as you can guess, I’ve been thinking for the last hour or so about Samuel baptizing me. But there’s an obvious problem that keeps coming back to me”.

Dmitry paused for a moment to see if Alison was on his wavelength about it.

“Yes, I can imagine”, Alison said as comprehension dawned. “Yes, Abdullah. But I don’t think Samuel would expect you to as it were join his church, come along every Sunday. And of course maybe... Abdullah would forgive you?”.

“Or murder me, or get me murdered” Dmitry said quietly, looking down at the worn carpet.

Then Dmitry lifted his head defiantly: “But OK, let that be. If I am baptized into Christ, that’s the whole point. We need not fear death. I’ll be resurrected. In fact, I am not... well, I *was not*... that fussed about continuing my human life. It’s just... I would rather like to be around a bit longer... for you. So... decision is yours”.

Alison thought about praying for guidance, but in such moments one has to make a decision based on the judgment built up over a lifetime. And after all, she had been praying to God in her mind all the time. No need, no appropriacy, in verbalizing it all.

“Let’s go. Let’s trust God over the Abdullah issue. After all, faith has to come into this. By me not baptizing you, or you not baptizing yourself, we’re kinda... flunking the issue a bit, not living by faith, so maybe now, we have to show some faith”.

Dmitry’s face broke into a relieved smile. “Great. Thanks for deciding. Let’s go. No need to call a taxi. There are taxis cruising around here all the time”.

The low life one-time prostitute who ran the sauna stood silently at the door as the happy couple walked out, Alison holding Dmitry’s arm, both smiling and evidently so happy.

“They’re gone? Shall I clean up now?” came the voice of a cleaner from some dark corner within the foyer.

“Yeah. Odd couple. They usually walk *in* like that, arm in arm and giggling, and then walk out separately or with long faces. They were different. And the guy, he was in there for over an hour on his own to start with. And he was so insistent about having a plunge pool”.

CHAPTER 17

The Last Gauntlet

As Dmitry had said, there was no lack of taxis. Alison called ahead to Beth, who was delighted and gushing all over with enthusiasm for them to come, whatever their problems or issues were. As they sat in the taxi, Alison thought for a moment how terribly hungry she was, not having eaten all day; and Dmitry pondered the fact that he really didn't have anywhere safe to lay his head that night. Just Alison's promise of getting him a hotel for the night. But... that would be expensive. And you can't live in hotel rooms, even cheap ones... forever. Alison said almost for the sake of it: “I'm starving... but no time to think about eating, ha... And, by the way, really don't worry about where you're going to sleep tonight. Really, I'll arrange it. I, well, I do have money. Maybe we can look around for an apartment for me to rent for you”.

Dmitry and Alison were holding hands as they sat on the back seat of that once grand Volga waiting its turn to cross the Kamenny Bridge over the Daugava river. Dmitry squeezed her hand and looked out at the frozen river, noticing how few ice fishermen there were on it today. “It's nothing less than... incredible, how we are on the same wavelength. I was just... wondering about where I was going to sleep tonight”.

Alison squeezed back, the taxi driver professionally oblivious to whatever was going on in the back seat. He wound his window down and pressed in the cigarette lighter. “Do you mind... not?”, Alison asked. “You see, we've both managed to quit, quite recently”. The driver shrugged and wound the window back up, curtly saying “Of course” as if to say “I am only agreeing in the hope you give me a tip”.

Dmitry retracted his gaze from the frozen river and turned toward Alison: “So, you think Samuel will do it?”.

“Baptize you? I am one hundred percent certain he will”, Alison replied with a calm smile.

“Yes, I am too”, Dmitry agreed. “I wonder if I'll have to make the confession... profession... statement, whatever you call it? I mean, whether I have to do it all again?”.

“Yeah, I dunno, maybe. But... are you going to tell him all about your murders, blood on your hands... and of course, Abdullah? How are we going to play that?”.

Dmitry squeezed her hand again but remained silent long enough for Alison to quietly push him again: “Well? What do you think?”.

“Again... we are on the same square, ha. I have been thinking about that one. You know, when I was alone in the sauna, I had the feeling you wouldn't be coming back that soon. When I realized I couldn't baptize myself, couldn't bring myself to do it, well, he was the only person I knew who could. So I had kinda decided to go to him and tell him all as it is, take a chance on him, get him to baptize me, and then just walk out of that door of his place, get out of Riga, and if I didn't hear from you, start the road to Daugavpils. My plan was to go to the Statoil gas station on Krasta street, where the A6 begins, I noticed the trucks tank up there before they start to Daugavpils. And just hang there and see if I could get a ride with someone. I had it all worked out. But I've learnt that all our plans, fears, the possibilities we fear, dream of, imagine... seem to come to nothing”, he concluded with an upbeat tone and a grin.

“Err... what quite do you mean?”.

“Well...”, Dmitry squeezed her hand and smiled gently at her, “Well, maybe all my plans were all negative, based around my fears, concerns about possible consequence. But God’s plans for me I see are... so much more *positive*. I mean, here I am, a *bomzh*, and I’m no more than that, in a way, sitting here with a beautiful woman in the back of a taxi driving to my baptism. Well, so I hope, I mean, I am hoping and praying that’s how it’ll work out”.

The happy if nervous silence was broken by the sound of the now unneeded cigarette lighter pinging out.

Alison spoke slowly: “So... well, thank God, I mean, *I* thank God, you are not down there at the Statoil petrol station trying to get a ride to Daugavpils. And, yes, it’s all, all so... amazing, it’s beyond me, beyond us, to keep in touch with all the threads that God’s weaving right now... as we sit here in this taxi. But... back to Samuel, Abdullah and that...”

“Yes yes you’re right... they are the issues really in my heart, however much I try to avoid facing them”.

“So”, Alison continued to speak slowly, “So you’ve decided to tell Samuel *all*, including about Abdullah?”.

“Well, yes, that was my thought”.

“I think you’re right. We have to trust someone. It’s all too much to carry on our own. I know, “cast your burden on the Lord”, but, like we’ve said, seems we both need... well, people generally need, some, what I’d call, “human face of God”, well actually that’s the title of a book by a guy called John Robinson. Cast our burden on the Lord... but “the Lord” is people, His people. In practice, down here on earth. So, we need that human face of God, at least you and me seem to. And, it’d seem, God has plonked Samuel and Beth in front of us”.

Dmitry nodded. He nodded for about a minute, in silence. “And the Abdullah thing... is always on my mind. Samuel might help to, let’s say, alleviate the problem, but he can never take it away”. The taxi driver interrupted their thoughts to ask which house number they wanted on Buļļu Iela.

Beth greeted them warmly at the door, children clutching at her legs and peeping out from behind them. Samuel had clearly just returned home, but gave the impression he was just sitting around with a spare evening. Dmitry remembered Samuel’s comment once that he didn’t have a television because he never had time to buy one let alone watch one. He really did have the ability to give the impression that he had time for anyone.

Dmitry and Alison politely declined the very genuine offers of drinks and biscuits, and even supper. “We... really, really need to talk very seriously, and, because the issues are serious, well, if you don’t mind, we’d like to talk right now. Just... so sorry to as it were gatecrash on your quiet family evening”.

Both Beth and Samuel succeeded in persuading Dmitry and Alison that really, they loved unexpected crises and problems coming up, as it was what they felt they were there for. Samuel insisted on making coffees for them all, joking with his slight smile: “Even if you guys don’t want a coffee you don’t mind if I have one, right”. Samuel led them in prayer and then with a raise of his eyebrows and sweep of his right hand, invited them to begin: “The floor’s yours... just, I’m gonna take it myself”, he grinned as he chose to sprawl himself out on the parquet floor. Playing absent mindedly with the New Zealand sheepskin rug- “a present from some really nice brethren who stayed with us last year”, Beth explained- Samuel listened to Dmitry and Alison’s story with little expression of surprise apart from the occasional raised eyebrow and tilt of the head to one side. Beth shuffled the children out of the lounge to play Noah’s ark in the little girl’s bedroom, but remaining within earshot.

When the story had petered out, Samuel suggested they held hands and pray. It was a short prayer, telling God they didn't know what really to ask for, but believed in Christ's mediation for them on a far higher level than what their human words could verbalize. It was, Alison reflected, what dear Jim Proctor used to say, all those years ago. "I really can say "Amen" to that, every word. Thanks so much, Samuel", Dmitry said quietly. "And me too... exactly", Alison quickly added.

Samuel gently smiled in his trademark way. "Sometimes I listen to people for hours and afterwards they say to the effect that Wow, Sam, you helped *so* much", when all I did was sit and listen. But, seriously though", Samuel continued in a more businesslike manner, "There are two immediate issues. One's your baptism. We can sort that. The other... well, OK, where Dima's gonna sleep tonight, well that's fixed, answer to that is, right here with us. But the other, Abdullah... I have no smart ideas. None at all. I get the sense that everyone who comes to Christ has some besetting, let's say, cross, issue, they have to carry. Years ago", and Samuel's eyes clouded slightly, "In the church of my youth...". Samuel's voice appeared now slightly strained as he continued: "In the church of my youth, we used to have Bible class. I can't remember all the talks I must've sat through, but there was this brother, I guess... dead now, fallen asleep in Christ, let's say... well, he was talking about Hebrews 12:1, laying aside "the sin that doth so easily beset us". Sorry to quote the King James, it was the version we used then... well, he suggested that each of us has a specific sin to "lay aside", and he linked it up with Jesus saying in Matthew... 16, I guess, towards the end of the chapter... that each man must take up *his* cross and follow Jesus, as if we each have our own specific cross. So I guess the Abdullah thing is your cross".

Dmitry nodded before adding: "And, I will be *his* cross. That's the thing, whether he will forgive me, he might... kill me, kill... Alison".

"And if he does, Dima, you know, it's almost your quick ticket to a place in God's Kingdom. Die young stay pretty, kinda, in spiritual terms. Get what I mean?". Samuel had raised himself from his relaxed position on the floor and crouched on his haunches, looking up directly at Dmitry.

"Yes, right", Dmitry responded immediately. "I've thought of that. It's just the path there that, of course, worries me. And who else gets hurt. I'm not afraid to die, to take the consequence of my... murder. My sin".

"By being baptized", Alison added thoughtfully, "You're showing that, that you are dying with Christ, taking the consequences of sin. But then you rise to a clean slate, new person, new life. But then... for sure, the old life still... affects, obtrudes into the present. I know... that's the problem isn't it, but...".

Samuel had stood up and paced the lounge. Now he turned and looked back the two meters or so to where Alison and Dmitry were sitting, perched on the edge of the couch. With some hope in his voice he interrupted Alison: "But you know, maybe we're worried about nothing, because I am not at all sure Abdullah will recognize you. It's some years ago, maybe if you grew a beard or something Dima, he'd never recognize you? And he doesn't come to meeting every Sunday, he lives out at the refugee centre at Mucenicki".

Dmitry smiled, weakly: "Yeah Samuel, I thought of that too. Growing a beard. Hoping he wouldn't recognize me. But it's rather like the other option, of me getting baptized and simply not coming to our church. Both those options, hoping Abdullah never recognizes me, and not attending church, they're rather like, taking the easy way, avoiding the cross, flunking the issue".

"Yeah you're right", Samuel said, as Alison said effectively the same: "That's so true". She continued: "I think we've been taught by all that's happened that we... we need church, need the body of Christ. Like you go and cry tears in the breaks, but you still come back to the church, so it seems Dima... and me too, we, as it were... need to also stay in the church. Whatever it costs. Even... death, maybe, a revenge killing, as the worst possible case".

The deep silence was broken by a delighted squeal from the bedroom. Dmitry continued with a ray of hope in his voice: "I know, Samuel, you can't say, but what do you rate the chances of Abdullah forgiving me?"

Samuel shrugged. "He's a highly committed, spiritual believer, from what I can see. But... we all struggle to forgive, and he will too. Whether he will succeed or not... I do not, cannot, know. And forgiveness, it's a process. It's not, in practice, just as simple as a handshake and a "play on", at least, not over something as major as this. God forgives, "frankly", the parable of the debtors says. In a moment, in a flash. But our forgiveness seems to me of a different, a lower, maybe, quality. It ends up a process for us. I'm not sure we have the... psychological power, the ability, to just in a moment forgive something like our father's murder".

The conversation about forgiveness led to Samuel discussing basic Bible doctrines with Dmitry, until he announced: "Dima, you so clearly know the Truth, the Truth of the Gospel, of Jesus. Let's... do the baptism. And just pray that this Abdullah issue... either gets resolved, or isn't too painful for any of us".

"I have been wanting to say that for the last half hour", Dmitry said. "And me too!", Alison almost giggled. "Well you were the guys holding things up!", Samuel joked back.

Beth ran the water in the bath tub, and Samuel's baptism service was performed against the background of running water and excited squawks from the children as they watched the bath fill. Samuel read Romans chapter 6, talking of the wonder of Christ's resurrection, how there was nobody waiting there to shake hands with Him as He walked out of the grave, how He would've stood there alone, watching the lights of Jerusalem shimmering in the distance as everybody got up, first day back to work after the holiday, and got on with early morning chores. "Not even Angels to meet Him... He stood there, as I imagine it, totally alone. You know, *Streets of Philadelphia*, "Ain't no Angel gonna greet me". Woops... sorry, I really have a bad way of mixing very, well, holy things with the... I won't say, the profane, but with the... mundane, worldly".

"No no Samuel", Alison enthusiastically interjected, "It's great, I love it. And it's *so* odd that I was thinking about that very song last night. Really... thinking about it. You know... sorry to interrupt your baptism speech but... it's so strange how we here in this room are all so connected... thinking the same things, time and again Dima and I have experienced it today".

"It's what the Bible calls "the fellowship of the Spirit", I guess", Samuel said approvingly. "Interconnections between persons, between and within our minds, the spirit, with a small 's'... yes, I know what you mean, and I feel it here, too".

Samuel resumed his speech about baptism, of how it's presented by Paul as a crossing of the Red Sea, a coming out of Egypt, "baptized in the cloud and in the sea", water on both sides of them and water above them, in the form of a cloud. "Never thought of that", Alison whispered with approval. And how life afterwards was a wilderness journey, no immediate entering into the promised land.

Beth settled herself into the vacant armchair, clean towel in hand. Samuel motioned toward her and smiled. "Dunno about "Ain't no Angel gonna greet me", looks like one is at least. And, Dima, well, seems, one other is going to as well", Samuel joked as he grinned towards Alison.

Samuel prayed, admitting to God how hard it was for all present to keep so many thoughts and "awarenesses", as he clumsily put it, consciously in the human mind at one and the same time. Dmitry and Alison again both expressed their thanks for him getting their thoughts right. "But... it's how I myself feel, too", Samuel shrugged.

"Well, you can go into our bedroom and change. Here's Sam's T-shirt and underpants, not ironed, but, clean, I assure you!", Beth said as she opened the door to their bedroom.

Alison, Samuel, Beth and the children stood in the corridor for some time, the somewhat awkward silence broken and alleviated by the children's excited comments: "*Jesus* was baptized, in a river!". "By John the *Baptist*", the little boy replied; "He ate locusts and *wild honey*!". And repeating his parents' words, he continued: "And *we* like honey, don't we!". "But not *locusts*", the little girl replied almost in rebuke. "*Locusts! Yuck!*".

Alison realized that Dmitry was taking far too long to change. She thought of her mother's cynicism when she had first started dating Alan... "many a slip between the cup and the lip". Was Dmitry going to... stall at the last minute? Jump out of the window? They were after all only on the third floor.

Samuel was perhaps feeling the same. He knocked on the closed bedroom door. Despite the lack of response, he opened it. Another squeaky handle, whose agony seemed to wrench on for minutes in Alison's ears. She could overhear Samuel speaking softly to Dmitry, and imagined him gently putting his hand on Dmitry's shoulder: "Is all OK? You... gonna do it?".

"Yeah. It's just... Abdullah. The whole Abdullah thing. It's just huge for me. But then... that's the reason, well, one of them, why... why I have to be baptized. OK, Sam. OK, let's go".

"But... what was the delay about?", Samuel asked, intrigued and slightly concerned.

"Just you coming in to this room was I guess enough. As Alison says, we just need that... human touch, human face of God, of Jesus".

Alison exhaled in relief as the two men emerged from the bedroom, and Beth noticed. The bath tub was full. Samuel spoke confidently: "You'll go on your side, make sure you don't lay on your arm, get your shoulder right on the bottom of the bath. And... your head this end", Samuel motioned toward the taps. "Just mind your head on the taps when you come up". Alison had never seen a baptism done in such a small domestic bath tub. She wondered whether Dmitry could really be immersed completely. Maybe a lack of full immersion would make it somehow not totally... legitimate? Her nervousness got the better of her, and she queried whether Dmitry would fit.

"Oh, no worries at all!", Beth assured her, putting her arm around her. "Sam's baptized real... well, enormous *babushkas*, like whales, in this bath. They all went under completely".

"OK", Alison said, without great conviction.

Dmitry lay as asked. "Just keep your hand over his legs, Alison, in case they come up a bit. And you realize, the water's probably gonna flood the floor a bit".

Heart in her mouth that a woman was playing a part in a baptism, Alison dutifully moved to the bath's end and placed her hands as directed above the water over Dmitry's submerged legs.

"Do you believe the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ?" Samuel asked Dmitry. Dmitry seemed slightly taken aback for a moment, but replied clearly: "I do, absolutely. Please baptize me".

"We're going to baptize you into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins" Samuel pronounced. The sound of Dmitry taking a breath and holding it was very distinct in Alison's ears. Putting his hand gently on the side of Dmitry's head, Samuel pushed him under. Alison's hands weren't needed. The water rose to the very top of the bath as Dmitry's head and exposed shoulder were submerged. Alison marvelled that there was not a ripple, it seemed, on the surface of the water. Samuel held Dmitry there for a moment. There was a silence... as Dmitry would've said, like the silence deep within a frozen pine forest in the dead of the Siberian Winter.

Dmitry emerged from the water and wiped the water from his eyes. Beth and Samuel withdrew, pulling the door half closed, to leave Alison to congratulate Dmitry alone.

“That was a particularly nice baptism”, Beth commented as she proudly pulled down Samuel’s rolled up shirt sleeves. “Even more beautiful than those we did in the Seychelles. Palm trees blowing in the wind, clear water with lovely fish in it and all that. With Dmitry, you know, there wasn’t a ripple on the water when you had him under”.

Beth then realized that her husband was holding back tears. She hugged him, almost apologetically. They stood in silence as the sound of two people uncontrollably weeping in the bathroom powered its way down the corridor toward them. The sound had an almost wave like sense to it, receding and then coming back strong.

“It’s gonna be *so* hard for him. And Abdullah. There was something I think I never told you, Beth. It was when I was baptized myself. I came out of the changing room, and my mum... my dear mum... was waiting there in her wheelchair to, I guess, greet me, congratulate me. I said “Mum, that was easier than I thought”. And she said “But Shmuel, the rest is not so easy”. And, when they’re through, maybe I’ll... share that with them too”.

The weeping from the bathroom seemed like it had reached a crescendo, but it went on to yet new levels.

Beth smiled through her tears and smiled fondly at Samuel. He was in Jewish mode: “Like how at the end of Deuteronomy, it says that Israel’s weeping for Moses after his death finally ended, but the Targum on that passage says that actually, the weeping continued”.

“But... there’s also joy in *this* weeping”, Beth responded, with a smile through her own tears.