

ETERNITY AND AFTERWARD

PUNCTUALITY HAD COME to be something of a curse for Viktor Chemayev. Though toward most of his affairs he displayed the typical nonchalance of a young man with a taste for the good life and the money to indulge it, he maintained an entirely different attitude toward his business appointments. Often he would begin to prepare himself hours in advance, inspecting his mirror image for flaws, running a hand over his shaved scalp, trying on a variety of smiles, none of which fit well on his narrow Baltic face, and critiquing the hang of his suit (his tailor had not yet mastered the secret of cutting cloth for someone with broad shoulders and a thin chest). Once satisfied with his appearance he would pace the length and breadth of his apartment, worrying over details, tactical nuances, planning every word, every expression, every gesture. Finally, having no better use for the time remaining, he would drive to the meeting place and there continue to pace and worry and plan. On occasion this compulsiveness caused him problems. He would drink too much while waiting in a bar, or catch cold from standing in the open air, or simply grow bored and lose his mental sharpness. But no matter how hard he tried to change his ways he remained a slave to the practice. And so it was that one night toward the end of October he found himself sitting in the parking lot of Eternity, watching solitary snowflakes spin down from a starless sky, fretting over his appointment with Yuri Lebedev, the owner of the club and its chief architect, from whom he intended to purchase the freedom of the woman he loved.

For once it seemed that Chemayev's anxiety was not misplaced. The prospect of meeting Lebedev, less a man than a creature of legend whom few claimed to have ever seen, was daunting of itself; and though Chemayev was a frequent visitor to Eternity and thus acquainted with many of its eccentricities, it occurred to him now that Lebedev and his establishment were one and the same, an inscrutable value shining forth from the dingy chaos of Moscow, a radiant character whose meaning no one had been able to determine and whose menace, albeit palpable, was impossible to define. The appointment had been characterized as a mere formality, but Chemayev suspected that Lebedev's notion of formality was quite different from his own, and while he waited he went over in his mind the several communications he had received from Eternity's agents, wondering if he might have overlooked some devious turn of phrase designed to mislead him.

The club was located half an hour to the north and west of the city center amidst a block of krushovas, crumbling apartment projects that sprouted from the frozen, rubble-strewn waste like huge gray headstones memorializing the Krushchev era -- the graveyard of the Soviet state, home to generations of cabbage-eating drunks and party drones. Buildings so cheaply constructed that if you pressed your hand to their cement walls, your palm would come away coated with sand. No sign, neon or otherwise, announced the club's presence. None was needed. Eternity's patrons were members of the various mafiyas and they required no lure apart from that of its fabulous reputation and exclusivity. All that was visible of the place was a low windowless structure resembling a bunker -- the rest of the complex lay deep underground; but the lot that surrounded it was packed with Mercedes and Ferraris and Rolls Royces. As Chemayev gazed blankly, unseeingly, through the windshield of his ten-year-old Lada, shabby as a mule among thoroughbreds, his attention was caught by a group of men and women hurrying toward the entrance. The men walked with a brisk gait, talking and laughing, and the women followed silently in their wake, their furs and jewelry in sharp contrast to the men's conservative attire, holding their collars shut against the wind or putting a hand to their head to keep an extravagant coiffure in place, tottering in their high heels, their breath venting in little white puffs.

"Viktor!" Someone tapped on the driver side window. Chemayev cleared away condensation from the glass and saw the flushed, bloated features of his boss, Lev Polutin, peering in at him. Several feet away stood a pale man in a leather trenchcoat, with dark hair falling to his shoulders and a seamed, sorrowful face. "What are you doing out in the cold?" Polutin asked as Chemayev rolled down the window. "Come inside and drink with us!" His 100-proof breath produced a moist warmth on Chemayev's cheeks.

"I'll be along soon," Chemayev said, annoyed by this interruption to his routine.

Polutin straightened and blew on his hands. A big-bellied ursine man of early middle age, his muscles already running to fat, hair combed back in a wave of grease and black gleam from his brow. All his features were crammed toward the center of his round face, and his gestures had the tailored expansiveness common to politicians and actors out in public, to all those who delight in being watched. He introduced his companion as Niall March, a business associate from Ireland. March gave Chemayev an absent nod. "Let's get on in," he said to Polutin. "I'm fucking freezing." But Polutin did not appear to have heard. He beamed at Chemayev, as might a father approving of his child's cleverness, and said, "I promised Niall I'd show him the new Russia. And here you are, Viktor. Here you are." He glanced toward March. "This one..." -- he pointed at Chemayev -- "always thinking, always making a plan." He affected a comical expression of concern. "If I weren't such a carefree

