

Major General Maxim Ivanovich Kalnikov had waited several days after he murdered Premier Orlov before arranging this private meeting at his new home with Orlov's former mistress, Irena Sorokin.

Maxim was sure that tonight Irena would request, possibly even demand, a significant reward from him for her silence and support. However, he did not care; whatever she wanted, he thought she damn well had earned it. If she had outed him that night, not only would he have not become famous, but he would also most certainly have been killed by the palace guards or the enraged mob that was gathering outside the palace.

Promptly at 7:00 PM, Irena arrived in the Bentley SUV Maxim had sent to fetch her from her exclusive apartment near the Winter Palace on the Moika embankment in St. Petersburg.

Escorted by a waiting uniformed attendant, Irena walked through the stone archway where two guards stood stiffly at attention. The attendant then opened the decorative thick wooden front door and led Irena into the parlor where Maxim was anxiously waiting. Her escort immediately departed afterward, closing the door behind him.

Irena, wearing a delicately embroidered pale cream wrap over an elegant and luxuriously dark magenta sheath that accented the vivid blue of her eyes, stood tall and imperious in the doorway. Her long blonde hair flowed alluring over her bare shoulders.

Maxim stared silently at her in awe, dazzled, breathless even, by her presence. He noticed she was wearing an elegant single, long strand of black pearls and a matching pair of earrings that spoke of the pricey jewelry store Chamovskikh's. Maxim guessed that these must have been one of Orlov's many gifts—or some other wealthy admirer.

As Maxim walked over to greet her, he was thankful he was tall, as, in her high heels, Irena stood well over six feet. As he got closer, he also noticed the exotic floral fragrance of her perfume that made her, if possible, even more enticing.

For a few moments longer, Maxim continued to gaze at her appreciatively before saying, "...Welcome, Irena. You're even more beautiful in person than I remember, and as I recall, the last time I saw you alone, you weren't wearing very much."

“Thank you, General. I am pleased that with what was going on that night that you even noticed.”

“I would have to be totally blind to not have noticed, and please call me Maxim.”

“I will be delighted to do that, Maxim. I was looking forward to finally getting together with you without everyone crowding around us and listening in.”

“Irena, I can promise that you could not have possibly been looking forward to this more than me.”

“Then, Maxim, I am even more delighted.”

After the stunning television news broadcast had divulged that Premier Orlov was personally responsible for destroying Moscow and killing all those millions of innocent people, the Russian people immediately clamored for Orlov’s death. When they learned that General Kalinkov had valiantly responded and exacted that price for them, which the renowned actress Irena Sorokin had personally witnessed, he had become in their minds their avenging angel.

Consequently, the next few days after he killed Orlov were a dizzying whirlwind of activity for Maxim. When he wasn’t testifying before the Federation Council, the Duma, or cloistered with the Prime Minister Alexy Varinski, he was being bombarded for interviews by the news media from all over the world. Fortunately, Maxim proved to be highly adept at playing the reluctant hero role and persona.

*If the people are gullible enough to believe I am a hero, then I am damn sure going to play the role and act like one*

And that is precisely what he did. He found that the more modestly he seemed in accepting all the praises and accolades, the more popular and famous he became.

Of course, it was not just General Kalnikov that was caught up in the fervor of the event. Because of her beauty and prominence as an actress, Irena became the darling of the news broadcasters as she sang her praises to the world of Kalnikov’s gallantry in killing Orlov for the Russian people and rescuing her from his cruel, brutal clutches.

It was a remarkable tribute to Irena's acting skill that the people readily accepted her portrayal that she had been Orlov's captive and sexual slave instead of being the willing ambitious mistress, which she actually was.

Tonight, to impress Irena and put her more at ease, Maxim decided to dress casually and not wear his uniform. Instead, he chose to dress in the pricey white linen Armani suit that he had recently received from a female admirer as a gift. To go with that, he wore an open collar rust-colored silk shirt, also by Armani.

Maxim knew he was only one of many men who yearned to impress Irena Sorokin. More than once, the press proclaimed that most Russian men, and boys over puberty, were secretly in love with her or lusted for her body.

However, in his own way, Maxim could also be considered desirable. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, handsome man with deep-set green eyes, prominent cheekbones, and a full head of wavy black hair. The few gray strands that peppered his hair only added to his rugged appearance. Although Maxim was in his early fifties, old enough to be Irena's father, he exercised often and was still in top physical condition.

Maxim was well positioned in the *nomenklatura* (elite Russian society). He had come from a good family and had a highly distinguished military service record to his credit. He had advanced quickly in rank during the years, leading to his success in leading the Russian offensive in Eastern Ukraine.

After returning from that campaign, Maxim had joined the GRU (Soviet Military Intelligence) five years earlier. Thanks to his assistance in helping Orlov conceal his guilt, he was now in charge of that nefarious organization.

Unlike Irena, Maxim was quite content with how things had turned out for him after the shooting. He was now incredibly famous, living a life of luxury, and most importantly, he was still alive. Although he shortly expected to be promoted to Colonel General and retain his directorship of the GRU, he had no higher political ambitions.

However, Maxim had to admit there was one thing he still desired, and that was Irena. He had been extremely jealous of Orlov, and as he stared at her, Maxim could not help thinking.

*Maybe I will get lucky and somehow convince Irena to stay overnight with me? That would sure make this evening perfect. Orlov had bragged to me about her exceptional skill at bringing him to new heights of pleasure in bed, and I had always become highly aroused imagining what that might be like?*

Maxim finally stopped his puerile musing and said with some embarrassment, "...Please, Irena, come sit next to me on the sofa," which he motioned toward, "...and let me get you a drink. What would you prefer?"

"If you are done gawking at me, I would like a glass of white wine if you have it."

"I'm sorry I was so obvious."

"Yes, you were, but that's okay; I don't mind. I wanted to look nice for you," Irena said as they walked over to the coffee-colored sofa with its' two matching armchairs positioned in the center of the room and sat down.

*Orlov told me he believed Maxim might be gay. But I think he was wrong from that long appreciative look he just gave me. At least, I sure hope so.*

Maxim turned toward her with an appreciative smile and said, "If that was your intention, you obviously succeeded."

"Good. I would like that glass of wine, so what do you suggest?"

"The wine cellar here is loaded with all kinds of wine; however, I would suggest a chilled Pinot Grigio?" Would that do? It seems to be a popular summer drink."

"That would be perfect," and Maxim ordered their wine from the attentive, hovering female staff member. He specified a bottle from Canyon Road, a California vintner that he had tried recently and knew would be good.

While waiting for the lady to get their wine, they talked casually about local current events and happenings.

A few minutes later, the woman returned from the cellar with the wine. After showing the bottle to Maxim, she opened it and poured a taste for him to sample. After Maxim tried the wine and declared his approval, the lady poured them each a tall glass and left the room.

Irena took a slow sip of her wine, savoring the light, crisp, floral taste and perfume-like aroma, "...It's delicious. You have excellent taste."

"Thank you."

Irena put down her wine, got up, and walked around the attractively decorated room, slowly inspecting everything, and asked, "...How did you manage to secure such a beautiful house, Maxim? It is magnificent."

"It belongs to a grateful wealthy oligarch, Vitaly Chernov, who owns most of the Russian telecom networks. He lent it to me as a gift, he says, permanently."

The house was one of the finest on Krestovsky island. It was styled like an English Manor. It was built in 2012 for the princely sum of 250 million rubles or about four million dollars. It had six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a state-of-the-art home theater, outdoor and indoor heated pools, a gymnasium, and a temperature and humidity-controlled wine cellar. Also included with the house's loan was a newer Bentley Bentayga SUV with a driver, a cook, and several additional staff, of which Maxim was still unsure of the total number.

"I know who Vitaly Chernov is; everybody does; he is famous. He played on the Olympic basketball team. Vitaly's so tall you can't miss him; he stands out in any crowd. But why was he so grateful he gave you all of this?" as she turned back toward him and gestured with open arms as if encompassing the room.

*Oh, dermo (shit)! Maybe Maxim is actually gay?*