

## CHAPTER ONE

### Finding Maria

Winters in Moscow are long, harsh and hard. Temperatures often drop from between minus twenty and minus thirty, and on occasions even lower. I looked outside at the falling snow and understood how much I really do hate the Russian winters. I hate going out - having to dress in so many layers and yet still feel cold. I hate wearing thick gloves, thick hat and a scarf covering my mouth – the taste of bits of wool mixed with condensation always makes me feel like vomiting. I hate the blind trudge through the thick snow, my head and body huddled against the driving blizzards. I hate queuing up for the number seventeen minibus, which stops opposite the supermarket not far from my apartment, waiting quietly and patiently until the bus pulls up and then the mad frenzy as everyone surges forward and battles to find a place to stand (there are rarely any seats). Old frail looking grandmothers, smiling sweetly and chatting happily about their grandchildren are suddenly transformed into merciless warriors as they fight and push and claw their way on. Everyone follows suit - no one wants to spend another fifteen minutes standing in the snow and relentless, biting cold - if you weren't willing to fight your way onto the bus and into a space, even before the bus has fully stopped, you would be probably be standing freezing at the bus stop for hours. One evening I remember having to walk home in the driving rain as, even after the third attempt, I still didn't manage to get myself onto a bus. I was pulled back and pushed aside time and time again until I simply gave up.

There were no taxis, so I walked the two miles home in the cold and pouring rain, moaning, extremely bad-tempered and wishing I was some place else.

Once on the bus, things don't get much better. Minibuses that are made to carry fifteen passengers often have double that amount squeezed on. Money for the fare is passed down the bus from passenger to passenger, eventually making its way to the driver who precariously sorts out the fares and change while recklessly negotiating and manoeuvring through the traffic, often at break-neck speed. Condensation in the minibuses is so thick it is virtually impossible to see out the windows and therefore to know when to get off. The driver will only stop when requested, miss the stop and off you go to the next and another long walk back in the snow. Normal buses are less frequent than minibuses but are twice as full. Even with relative warmth of a full bus, icicles hang from the ceiling and the floor as slippery as an ice rink.

I walked over to the window and looked at the thermometer: minus twenty four. My journey to the other side of Moscow to meet Inna, my wife, was not going to be pleasant. I wasn't looking forward to it in the slightest. I looked down at my watch, it was three o'clock in the afternoon and I had two hours to get ready and get myself across Moscow to a typically Russian bistro that we had arranged to meet at near to her office. Called "Moo- Moo" it served tasty, hot and very cheap Russian cuisine in a large self-service restaurant packed with noisy Russians eating before their inevitable long, cold journey home.

I looked down to the streets below, at the few huddled figures rushing here and there. It was snowing heavily, horribly cold and no one in their right mind

would ever spend any longer outside than absolutely necessary. Any part of the body left uncovered would, within a few short minutes, be stinging and raw and painful. No Russian would ever dream about going outside in mid winter without layers of heavy clothing, a thick, furry, warm hat, thick boots and heavy insulated gloves. When I first came to Moscow I had the misfortune of forgetting, or perhaps not thinking I would need a hat. As I left the apartment I wondered why those around me looked both horrified and concerned. Within a few short minutes of being outside I completely understood - my head was thumping with the intense cold and my ears burned. It was minus thirty two that day and I had no choice but to turn around and quickly go back home. It can sometimes be so cold that the water in your eyes would actually start to freeze, and I have even had a bottle of vodka turn to thick syrup after just a short walk from the supermarket to my apartment. Russian winters are unforgiving.

I knew it would take me about an hour to get to the restaurant. I had a ten minute walk to the bus stop - I was really hoping I wouldn't have to wait too long for a bus - then a ten minute bus journey to the nearest metro station at Prospect Vernadskogo. From Prospect Vernadskogo I would then take the metro into the centre of Moscow, changing lines at Chistye Prudy station, to Alekseevskaya, my destination. Thankfully "Moo-Moo", with its large black and white sign of a Friesian cow outside, was just next to the metro at Alekseevskaya and just a two minute walk.

My wife took this journey every morning and every night, five days a week, and in every kind of weather. I was reluctant to do it just the once. I hadn't been

outside in almost a week, preferring the solitude of the computer and my thoughts about the couple of articles I had been contracted to write about Russian life for British magazines.

I had originally come to Moscow as a bodyguard for a chairman of a multinational company. This was how I met Inna. She was working for the security company I worked in partnership with. Whenever I needed Russian bodyguards, or run an investigation for a western company with interests in Russia, I would always call her. She was the personal assistant to the ex KGB Director and had contacts for almost anything. After a few months of speaking to her on the telephone and occasionally popping into their office, I asked her out.

Bodyguarding and security had been my life since the late eighties, and I have travelled the world protecting the rich and famous. I tended to concentrate primarily on areas of high risk, and had spent time in Bosnia during the conflict, Israel, Africa and Asia, but as I got older the appeal and excitement grew less and my safety and the future of my daughter became the most important thing. Although I didn't see her that often I would speak to her every few days, write once a week and see her whenever I could. I didn't want her to grow up with just a picture of me on the mantle-piece, knowing that her Daddy got killed in some far off place protecting someone she never heard of. I had more or less given up bodyguarding. I had taken a journalist course, joined the National Union of Journalist and now made my frugal living in Moscow as a freelance writer writing stories and selling them. I had written about the difficulties of being black in Moscow, the prejudice, the hatred, the beatings. This won an award from

IMPACT Magazine. I had also written about two gay women struggling with their sexuality in society where being gay was, until just a few years ago, a criminal offence. I enjoyed writing and had just finished my first book. One of the articles I had been contracted to write was about a female bodyguard protecting her client against the Russian mafia, which I found fascinating. I really did not want to go out but I had promised Inna I would meet her that evening and buy her dinner and so, reluctantly, I searched for my boots, hat, scarf and gloves.

With my mind focused on a large steaming bowl of Borsch soup, I locked the apartment door and called for the elevator. As I waited for the antiquated lift to slowly make its way from the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor to the 6<sup>th</sup>, I could feel myself getting hotter and hotter. That was another thing I remembered I hated about the Russian winters – wearing layers and layers of clothing for the outside, and then having to get on the packed, hot, stuffy metro, wrapped up and insulated against the bitter cold outside. You quickly feel like being slowly baked inside a microwave. After a few short minutes it becomes unbearable and you crave to at least take your coat off. But there is generally no room and you stand and sweat and suffer. For me the worst bit was not the baking but the going back outside into the freezing cold with sweat running down my back.

Going from plus twenty to minus twenty in one swing of a door never fails to shock me. Almost all apartment blocks in Moscow are communally heated twenty four hours a day throughout the winter. Big industrial boilers feed large areas of high rise apartment blocks day in day out – there is no individual temperature control, heating is either on or off. In the summer heating is off, in

the winter it is on and in the height of the winter the temperature inside the apartment blocks is probably around twenty degrees. Twenty four hour heating and hot water for a tiny monthly fee is one of the slightly better things about living through a Russian winter, rarely did my monthly utility bill exceed ten pounds. But walking from plus twenty into minus twenty is like being slammed full on by a speeding truck. The cold hits you hard and it takes a few moments to catch your breath. Breathing through the mouth is dangerous and can quickly freeze the moisture that lines the throat, so you have to slowly inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. After a few slow breaths, and a lot more grumbles, I pulled my hat lower over my ears, pulled my coat collar higher and trundled as quickly as I could towards the bus-stop.

Even though I did indeed hate the Russian winters and longed for the sun and the summer, there is something truly magical about the snow. I can honestly say that Moscow city centre – the Red Square and Kremlin, on a bright sunny morning after a thick layer of fresh snow, is one of the most beautiful and magical looking places in the world. The irony is of a fairytale, innocent, magical looking palace inhabited by ruthless, authoritarian dictators.

We lived in quite a nice area of Moscow, south of the city centre, not far from the university, where many lecturers, teachers and academics lived. By British standards the rows and rows of high rise apartment blocks would have long ago been marked for demolition and, admittedly, in the autumn rain and spring thaw the place looks deprived and dirty and impoverished, but in the snow the whole area has a perfect, clean, healthy feel. It is as though, for a few months

of every year, everything that is dirty and corrupt and immoral about Russia is covered by a sheet of clean, white, crispy linen. When it first starts to snow everything is beautiful and exciting and different, but after a few months of unremitting cold and relentless driving snow, it is no-longer nice, everything is bad and horrible and depression and despair settles in.

Thankfully, going into Moscow at that time in the afternoon is not nearly as hectic as early in the morning and a minibus was waiting at the bus-stop. Only half full, I clambered on, paid the driver the seven roubles (fifteen pence) fare and found a seat at the back. Late morning and early afternoon minibuses have a tendency to wait until they are almost full before setting off. This is great if you are at the beginning of the route, which thankfully I was, but not so good if you live midway along a route as then, generally, the minibuses are completely full and speedily pass waiting passengers. A couple of passengers quickly followed me onboard, slamming the sliding door behind them. The driver crunched the minibus into first gear and we started to move.

Almost all Russian minibuses are old and dilapidated and have had years of abuse, and DIY botched repairs. Together with the appalling state of many Moscow roads, most journeys, however short, are incredibly uncomfortable. The suspension on most minibuses simply does not exist, thumping through and bouncing over the dozens of potholes that litter most routes causes you to tightly grip the seat rail in front and hold on for all your worth. Engines snarl and roar and sound as though it would be the minibus' last kilometre, ever. Gears scrape and crunch, handbrakes almost never work and no one has ever heard of a

catalytic converter. Taking a Russian minibus is not for the fainthearted and almost no foreigner, ever, takes a minibus anywhere. If I had a choice nor would I, but I didn't have a car and there was no other way, apart from a long walk, to the nearest Metro.

I suffered in silence as the minibus rattled and rocked its way to Prospect Vernadskogo Metro station. Thankfully most minibuses stop at the metro stations without being requested. I got off with almost all the other passengers and followed the trail of huddled bodies down the steps into the Moscow Metro system – probably one of the best and most efficient underground systems in the world.

Unlike the London underground, where annoying neon signs inform you that the next train to Ealing Broadway would be in approximately five days time, the Moscow metro trains run without fail every two or three minutes. The cost of ten Metro tickets is fifty roubles (about one pound), which is about ten pence a ride to anywhere in Moscow. Whether you are going one stop, or from one end of Moscow to the other, one ride is just ten pence. Whenever I returned to London I would always be horrified at the cost, the inefficiency and the crazy zone system of the London underground. As with many things in England, the underground is extremely expensive and exceedingly unreliable. Not so in Moscow – the metro, when it isn't particularly crowded, is a wonder of technology. Not only that, many of the Metro stations are simply awesome. Brilliantly designed, beautifully decorated and wonderfully kept, the Moscow metro system is a stunning tourist

attraction by itself and can be ranked alongside The Red Square, The Kremlin and The Bolshoi.

I bought my block of ten tickets from the sorrowful looking cashier, passed one of the many thousands of Moscow's wretched beggars, standing silently with head bowed and an outstretched grubby hand holding a few miserable kopeks (100 kopeks = 1 rouble), and boarded the train that had just pulled in. After a while you don't even notice the beggars - their faces and their despair. Another one of a thousand, maybe two thousand, it is impossible to give to everyone so I didn't give to any. I quickly walked passed them all, trying not to look at their faces, not even considering that they were human and suffering terribly. After the first few weeks living in a world of poverty and deprivation, I became so accustomed to beggars on every street corner, in every metro station, outside every supermarket - to me they no longer existed. There were not drug addicts, alcoholics or mentally ill but soldiers whose legs had been blown off in Chechnya, or men and women old enough to be my grandparents, or those unfortunately born disabled or facially disfigured, or the destitute – Moscow was full of them, all unable to survive in a normal world and all on the streets begging for survival. They were all begging for their next hot meal - *not* for their next fix or bottle of meths.

I hated myself for walking past, for not even looking at them but I knew I had neither the money nor the ability to help. What could I do? I often imagined myself a multi-millionaire paying someone to travel the metro system day in day out handing out enough money for a hot meal and better clothing to every beggar

they would come across. Or perhaps setting up a sanctuary where the destitute, the disabled and the elderly could get warm and eat a good meal. I completely understood that this really wasn't the answer - giving like this would never ever be enough, but surely it would give someone, somewhere a little comfort, even for a day? I so wanted to do something for these people, they were not addicts or ill, but normal people blighted by Russia's corruption.

Being the second biggest oil producer in the world, Russia should be one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but greed is colossal and most of the money the Russian government allocates to the poor and needy never reaches them. It is filtered away down the bureaucratic line into the pockets of everyone but those that need it the most. There are very few Russian charities in Russia, no one really cares for or bothers about anyone else apart from themselves. No one trusts the banks, the government, the police, the system and everyone's preoccupation is surviving themselves, protecting their own wealth. No one gives to Russian charities as they believe, and often rightly so, that the money will not go to the cause but into the pockets of the charity directors. There is little accountability and an enormous amount of corruption and crime. As a westerner with different morals and ethics I was shocked to the core when I saw an ambulance, lights flashing, siren screaming, struggling to get through a queue of traffic. No one moved. The ambulance just sat there in traffic and no one cared. This, for me, summed up Russia's attitude to others – they just don't care. There is no country anywhere else in the world whose inhabitants ignore the cries of the ambulance. I remembered an interesting documentary on Russian television,

which Inna translated for me. It concerned a newly married couple who sat in their car in front of an ambulance, ignoring its sirens and flashing lights and continuous banging of the horn. They were in traffic on their way home and didn't want to lose their place in the queue. They refused to move or to let the ambulance pass, all the way back to their apartment block they sat in slow moving traffic directly in front of the ambulance. Just as they turned up outside their apartment, the woman's mother rushed to meet the ambulance, crying and screaming as to why the ambulance had taken so long. The ambulance was visiting that same couple's son who had suddenly fallen critically ill.

There are, of course, a few charities operating in Russia, mainly foreign and few and far between. These are generally frowned upon by the Russian government. The Russian government still does not like foreign aid - it is an old communist mind-set that Russia and its people are too proud to accept help from others. They believe they should support their own, even though they won't and don't and that most of the money is stolen by the same people that originally allocated it.

With the huge amount of resources coming from oil production, Russia should have the best hospitals and health care, the best schools, the best pensions and infrastructure in the world. But they have the worst because no one cares for anyone and the huge amount of wealth is quickly siphoned away and stolen.

And so the streets are littered with beggars and the destitute and I, along with most others, walk quickly past, head bowed, fiddling with my metro ticket or pretending to make a mobile phone call.

The metro from Prospect Vernadskogo to Chistye Prudy wasn't that busy, most people at that time of the afternoon were travelling out from the city centre, but from Chistye Prudy leaving the city to Alekseevskaya, I knew the metro was going to be packed. I managed to find a seat, took off my thick gloves, took out my mobile phone and started to text Inna telling her I was on my way. There was no signal but we would soon be travelling for a short time above ground over the Moskva River and I would press the "send" button as we stopped at the new Vorobyovy Gory station. The first stop after Prospect Vernadskogo was Universitet (Moscow State University). I knew the route well by now and sat huddled over the phone, typing my text. I vaguely heard the recording informing us that the doors were closing and the next stop was Vorobyovy Gory, and felt the train start to move. I didn't look up. No one looks up once they have found a seat. They engross themselves in a book, or play with their phone, or pretend to sleep - anything but look up. If they looked up they might see an elderly frail passenger, gripping the rail, struggling to support themselves as the carriage rocked backwards and forwards, and no one wants to give up their seat.

I was the same. It was a long journey and seats were rare and, even though I was relatively young and fit, I didn't fancy standing for the whole journey. I kept myself pre-occupied with my phone, staring at it hoping no one needed a

seat. I had been in Moscow six months and was behaving like the Russians, struggling to survive and only thinking about myself.

A few seconds after the train has pulled away from the platform I felt the presence of someone standing directly in front of me. I didn't want to look up but somehow felt compelled to see who it was that was so close and invading my personal space.

“Pa-a-da-a-y-te na pro-pi-ta-a-nie.” (Please, give me a few roubles for food).

Reluctantly I looked up to see a man of about thirty years old looking down at me. He had fairly short mousey coloured hair, was clean shaven with about a three inch scar diagonally running across his chin. His face appeared quite kind, but his eyes looked sad and distressed and vacant, as though he knew this was his empty, heartless miserable destiny. He wore a white, torn and slightly soiled vest and out from each side of his vest were two short stumps where his arms should have been. The right stump ended just above the elbow, the left a couple of inches below his shoulder. There were jagged scars on each stump – he was not disabled because of an abnormality at birth but from an accident, probably while in the army and probably, considering his age and the fact that he wore combat trousers, from the war in Chechnya.

He smiled and looked down and nodded at a small bag hanging from his neck. “Pa-a-da-a-y-te na pro-pi-ta-a-nie.”

I wanted to know what had happened to him and how he survived those horrific injuries. What kind of life was he living? Where did he go once his day's

begging had ended? How long had he been begging on the metro like this and who looked after him? Did he have a family, children, wife, mother, father? What drove him to travel the dirty metro every day begging to survive? Was there nothing else he could do? I thought about all the hundreds of beggars I have seen on Moscow's streets, all with a story to tell, all leading such miserable, desolate lives, all struggling to survive. Every day, day in day out, they stand and beg and hope for mercy but every day no mercy comes, their lives never change, their destiny remains exactly the same.

I rummaged in my pocket for some change and placed it into his small bag. He nodded, said "Spasiba" (thank you) and moved on down the carriage saying the same thing to the other passengers. I watched as most of the passengers in my carriage remained with their heads bowed pre-occupied with their books or pretending to sleep, not looking up, not acknowledging this desperate human being standing in front of them. The few passengers that did look up said no and quickly looked down again. He wouldn't plead, he just moved onto the next person and the next and the next, making his way slowly down the carriage. As the train stopped at the station he jumped off, walked down the platform and jumped back on at the next carriage. I looked through the murky glass windows of the carriage's connecting doors and could just about make out his unusual shape as he made his way down that carriage. This was his life, jumping from carriage to carriage displaying his disability in the hope of just enough sympathy to buy his next meal.

Change!! I felt disgusted and horrified with myself. Change!! I probably only gave him fifteen roubles, about thirty pence. Why didn't I give more? I could afford to have given him a lot more. Why was I so afraid of giving? Why didn't I give him one hundred or two hundred roubles? I had the money in my wallet. My excuse to myself was that if I gave him a hundred roubles, I would have to give every beggar a hundred roubles, but I didn't give to anyone anyway. Why did I feel resentment at giving when I knew there was no alternative for people like him? Unlike England, Russia cannot make him comfortable, pay for nurses and helpers, dress him, feed him, and find him work. Unlike England, beggars are forced onto the streets because of their infirmity, age, helplessness and not because of their addiction or illness. I would never give to anyone on the streets in England because I knew it would more than likely go towards their next bottle of gin or fix, but in Moscow money goes for food and clothing and shelter. If you are homeless in Moscow you are homeless – there is no such thing as housing for the homeless, charity soup kitchens, state support. You fight and fend for yourself the best way you can, or die. It is as simple as that. As I watched him disappear I wondered why I couldn't have done more. What had stopped me opening my wallet and giving him more? My own selfishness and self interest? My own greed? Was I really that selfish that even one pound was too much?

Changing trains at Chisty Prudy is chaotic as it is a junction between three main lines and at that time of the evening everyone was going home. Like the minibuses, everyone surges onto the carriage, giving little space for passengers to get off. There is no polite waiting to one side, you have to battle

your way off the carriage through the hoards aiming to squeeze themselves on. Politeness and manners are very low on the Russian list of social priorities, even less so out on the streets, in the metros and on the buses. Because the metros are so cheap and so reliable, millions and millions of people use them each and every day. Apart from the main metro stations at the major tourist sites, most of the signs are written in Cyrillic, the Russian alphabet, and therefore an extremely daunting and confusing place for most foreigners. There are no metro maps on the actual platforms themselves, so you have to make sure you know where you are going and what line to take in advance and before you buy your tickets. Big signs in the centre of the metro station display the list of stations on that particular line, as well as on the tunnel walls facing each platform, but you have to know where you are going and know the destination's name in Cyrillic. What is even more confusing is that connecting stations have different names and there are even a couple of stations with the same names. For example the British Embassy is on Metro Smolenskaya, but there are two Smolenskayas, both near each other but one on the blue line and the other on the purple line. Depending upon which one you get off results in either a two minute walk down a side street to the Embassy or a ten minute walk and suicidal dash across a busy six lane highway. But once you get used to it, the Metro is a quick, efficient and an extremely cheap way of travelling throughout central Moscow. Bar a rare emergency or an occasional breakdown, you can generally plan your time from arrival to destination within a few minutes. Trains run like clockwork, as soon as one train pulls away, another quickly follows. Platforms are huge and spacious

and most beautifully and ornately decorated denoting a historical scene or symbolising a remarkable event or famous person. The escalators carrying the millions of passengers into the depths and bowels of the earth are some of the biggest and longest in the world. At the bottom of every escalator, in a little glass box sits a grumpy looking guard whose duty it is to look after their escalator. Normally elderly women, they sit in their little glass box day in day out watching the millions of people descend *their* escalator. If you misbehave, or sit down, or place your bag on the moving hand rail, they shout at you loudly over the loudspeaker, instructing you to stop doing whatever it was that you were doing and behave correctly.

Like bloodhounds armed police mill around in small groups targeting anyone looking remotely like a foreigner - checking papers, passports and documents and eliciting illegal fines. A policeman's normal wage is equivalent to around fifty pounds a month which is not enough to survive, even in Moscow, so the majority of their salary is made up from stopping people, checking their papers, finding something wrong – even if invariably there isn't – and taking them to some dark and quiet place where they would demand money. No one wants to be locked up in a Russian prison so almost everyone pays, regardless of whether their papers are correct or not. I had the misfortune of being stopped once, and was forced to pay a ten dollar fine. At first they demanded a hundred dollars, but after a little negotiation and bartering I managed to get them down to ten. Police target foreigners because they know they have fewer rights and generally a lot more money than Russians – although during the summer they are instructed not

to - it wouldn't look good targeting tourists. But if you are a foreigner at any other time of the year, or away from the centre of the city, it is almost guaranteed that you will be stopped, have your papers checked and quite possibly fined.

At Chistye Prudy station I took the short walk to Turgenevskaya for the orange line to Alekseevskaya. The metro was packed and a sea of people flowed from one platform to another and from one train to another. I joined the flow of bodies along the connection tunnel to Turgenevskaya station. From there I would only have four stops to Alekseevskaya and my hot bowl of Borsch soup. I couldn't wait. I hated this time of the day and all these people. After just a few short minutes you feel dirty and tired and long for the fresh air and open space, even though the fresh air was minus twenty three and the open space was the centre of Moscow but anywhere, even the cold, was better than the crowded, hot, stuffy, dirty metro.

I got off at Alekseevskaya and again followed the flow of people onto the escalator and up into the world above. The escalator led up to a small open area with kiosks selling flowers, magazines, medicines and cigarettes. In between the two rows of kiosks were the thick heavy swinging doors that led outside. With every swish of the door an intense blast of cold penetrated the metro. People pulled down their hats, tightened their scarves and pulled up their collars as they left the warmth of the metro for the cold of Moscow's streets. As I walked passed the kiosks towards the swinging doors something against the wall near the door caught my eye. I looked down to see a pretty dark haired girl on a small wooden platform, arms outstretched, bare hands cupped. She could have been no more

than early twenties and I could immediately see she had no legs and her torso was strapped to a small wooden wheeled platform with a thick belt. Lying next to her on the wet dirty floor was a wooden block with a handle. I was steered through the doors and out of the metro with the crowd, but I kept glancing back at this pretty girl staring up at everyone as they rushed blindly passed her, barely looking down.

“I want you to do something for me.” I almost screamed to Inna as she approached me at the restaurant. I had found a seat but waited impatiently with my coat still tightly buttoned, scarf tightly wrapped and hat still firmly placed on my sweaty head and anxiously counting each second until Inna arrived.

“What’s wrong?” she nervously said as I jumped up and led her back outside before she could even unbutton her coat

“Quick, I saw a girl begging at the metro and I want to talk to her, she might have an interesting story.” While I was waiting for Inna I had an idea that I could write an editorial about this girl and sell it to an English magazine. I thought that life begging on the streets of Moscow would make a fascinating human interest story and I had a notion that I could then help her in the only way I knew how - give her the money from the sale of the story.

We rushed out of the restaurant and back towards the metro, leading Inna by the hand I was almost running through the slippery snow. Moscow metros have separate entrances and exits and it was almost impossible to fight through the hoards of people flowing from the exit but we struggled and ignored the abuse of the passengers telling us that this was not the entrance. We eventually

gave up and waited a few minutes until there was a slight lull between trains and then rushed headfirst in. I looked down to where the girl was sitting just a short while earlier, she was not there. I frantically looked around - she was nowhere to be seen.

About two months later, as I worked on my computer at home, Inna called me from her mobile.

“I have just seen her!” she cried.

I had braved the winter and the snow many times over the previous two months meeting Inna from work and hoping and praying that I would see the girl again. As the weeks passed I had virtually given up. The Russian winter was more or less ending, the snow had almost all but disappeared and, although it was now raining a great deal and still quite cold, getting around wasn't as difficult as it had been a couple of months previously. Although I still hated the minibuses and travelling into town, it became easier and easier and after a long day sitting squared eyed in front of the computer screen I would often want to travel an hour to Alekseevskaya, meet Inna and journey back home together.

“Where is she?” I shouted?

“At the Metro – shall I talk to her?”

“Yes, try and ask if we can meet her and talk to her and take some photos. Tell her I am an English journalist and that we shall write a story for an English magazine and give her some money.” We had spoken about this many times and Inna knew exactly what to say.

“All right, I will see what I can do and ring you back in a minute.” The line went dead. I sat by the side of the bed looking down at the phone, willing it to ring. I was so hoping that everything would be okay, that she would be happy for us to talk to her, that we could arrange to meet and that she did indeed had an interesting story to tell. As I had wondered about the life of the disabled man on the metro, I had frequently wondered about the life of this pretty young girl.

The phone rang and I snatched at it “Hello.”

“I am with her now. Her name is Maria, how about tomorrow at five pm at the metro, is that all right?”

“Great, tell her we will see her there then. Do you have any money on you? Can you give her some now?” I wanted to make sure she would turn up.

“I have a little – I will give her a hundred roubles and we can give more tomorrow if she turns up.”

“Great, see you later.”

I put the phone down and breathed a huge sigh of relief. For some reason I wanted this interview more than any other I had done. After seeing that poor man with no arms begging on the metro I felt wanted to help a little. I had seen and generally ignored poverty and hardship many times on my travels around the world but I still felt saddened and upset that people were leading this awful, miserable life. I knew nothing about this girl, apart from a pretty face looking up at me one horrible winter’s day a few months ago, but hopefully I could write a good story and sell it to a magazine for a decent amount of money and help her a little – whoever she is and whatever kind of life she is leading.

The rest of the afternoon I spent preoccupied with thoughts of Maria and what we were going to talk about. I thought about what I was going to ask her - what was she doing there, where did she live, where were her family, what had happened to her, how did she lose her legs, did she have a boyfriend, what was life like for her on the streets, what were the biggest problems? So many questions, and some of them so personal. Could I actually ask them and would she actually tell me?

The next day Inna and I travelled together to meet Maria. As we exited the metro we saw her sitting on her little wooden platform talking to a haggard, scruffy looking man selling newspapers. She turned to us, smiled, said something to the man and, with the help of her small wooden block, wheeled herself towards where we were standing. I looked down at her pretty eyes and sweet smile, greeted her in my basic Russian and shook her hand. She said something to Inna. "Shall we go and sit somewhere?" Inna asked.

"Sure, where?" I answered looking around.

We followed Maria as she wheeled herself towards a small open space, bordered by a grass verge where there were a few benches. The sun was shining, but I could see dark heavy clouds slowly building on the horizon and I hoped that we could finish before it rained. Before we started I asked Maria if I could take a photo, she agreed. I looked down my lens to this pretty little girl strapped to her wooden platform looking up at me smiling. Inna and I sat on the bench looking at Maria as she began her story.

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