

Background

Sasza Załuska

Sasza Załuska is a psychological profiler with a history of alcohol abuse. For years she lived in England with her daughter Karolina, hiding from her past. Before she left Poland, Sasza used to work as an undercover cop, investigating a man suspected to be the Red Spider – a diabolical serial killer targeting young women, whose calling card is the fact that he paints pictures of his victims. During the investigation, Sasza made a rookie mistake and grew emotionally attached to Łukasz Polak, the man she was supposed to keep under observation. At some point, he found out who Sasza really was and, out of desperation, took her prisoner. Unable to find a way to escape, as a last resort Sasza decided to seduce her captor in the hope of gaining his trust. As soon as Polak let his guard down, Sasza called for help. Before the anti-terrorist unit managed to storm the flat the Red Spider was keeping her in, Polak, determined not to be taken alive, set fire to the apartment. Sasza was saved by firefighters, but sank into a coma. When she regained consciousness weeks later, she learned two things – that Łukasz Polak was dead, and that she was carrying his child. At that point, Sasza decided to turn her life around. She left the police, quit drinking, and moved to England, not returning to her home country until many years later.

Podlasie

The north-eastern border of Poland, or Podlasie as the region is called in Polish, is a beautiful, fascinating land – home to the last primordial forest in Europe and hundreds of historical monuments and places of remembrance. It is a highly diverse region with a rich

history and a stunning heritage. It is also a melting pot of cultures and religions with a dark and difficult past. As a place where the fighting during World War Two was especially fierce, it is a region where the scars to the psyche of the local populace run deep, and the memories of crimes committed in the past still divide people.

Two major religious communities dominate the area – the Catholics and the Orthodox. The former are mostly Poles, while the latter include Belarusians and Ukrainians. Because of the difficult history between the two groups, parts of both have radicalised, and in recent years far-right nationalistic movements have dominated the political scene of the region. Tensions between the two groups are common, and tend to revolve around the historical injustices and terrible atrocities committed by roving bands of deserters who refused to acknowledge the cessation of hostilities in the mid-forties, after the war had officially ended. These groups of soldiers-gone-rogue are referred to as the ‘Cursed Soldiers’. After they turned their backs on the newly formed communist regime, parts of the guerrilla brigades under the command of Romuald Rajs, *nom de guerre* ‘Bury’,* went on a bloody rampage across the land of Podlasie, murdering hundreds of innocents – mainly Orthodox Belarusians. Now, nearly eighty years later, those war crimes are still far from forgotten, while their perpetrators are idolised by some Polish nationalists and reviled by the ethnic and religious minorities in Podlasie.

* ‘Bury’ in Polish is ‘The Grey’ or ‘The Dun’.

Prologue

Sopot, May 2014

When, after the third signal, he finally picked up the receiver, she kept quiet, though she should have asked about Zofia.

In the background, she could make out the sound of the TV and the laughter of children. A family reunion, she thought. A tureen of chicken soup on the table, home-made cake on porcelain saucers. The kids, unaware of the things their grandpa, playing the role of Santa Claus each Christmas, did for a living, are running an obstacle course across the apartment. *Tom and Jerry* is blaring from the TV. The adults have to raise their voices to be heard. They toast each other with glasses of pear schnapps. Their guns, clips pulled out and stacked next to boxes of spare ammo, are safely locked in an armoured cabinet.

‘Zofia’s out,’ one of them said. ‘Gone to the labour ward.’

Sasza breathed out with relief. When she had left, her handler had already had forty-one years of service behind him, but apparently he was still on duty. His first grandchild had been born after the man had recruited her. She remembered taking notice of the newborn’s photo on the desktop of his PC. ‘Marcel,’ he had beamed, adding, ‘his sister’s already on her way.’ Since that exchange, she had always referred to the officer as ‘Gramps’. The moniker had stuck and now everyone was calling him that. For years she hadn’t learned his real name. Until yesterday, that is. She counted on Gramps not realising she knew. That would be the first time she would actually have an advantage over him.

‘The labour ward?’ Sasza smiled. The man wouldn’t hang up now. He’d be too curious about what his erstwhile underling wanted. ‘What’s up with that?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ he grumbled, falling back on his old routine.

She heard a wheeze in his breath, then a cough, and a crackling noise. He must have excused himself and was now slowly making his way to another room. When he finally closed the door and a silence fell, she felt the need to add something by way of explanation, but he spoke first.

‘Telephone books are a thing of the past and I’m not on Facebook, so—’ He broke off.

‘Guess. You found my number when you mixed me up in that affair with Needles, didn’t you?’

‘You’re not that good.’

‘Probably,’ she conceded, ‘but I have my ways, too.’

‘Two more seconds and it’ll start recording,’ he warned. His voice didn’t sound hostile. Bored, more like. ‘We’ll both get in trouble.’

She hung up and sat down on the floor, cross-legged, lighting a cigarette.

The PC screen flickered and went out. Before it did, Professor Tom Abrams’s photo filled the desktop. Her PhD supervisor. They still had to discuss the last seminar. She hadn’t contacted him for a while and Abrams was getting worried. He had been trying to catch her on Skype for the last couple of days, messaging her what seemed like dozens of times. Sasza had been working, but she wanted to finish the last chapter first and only discuss her thesis with him when she was finished. She promised herself she would catch him at the institute tomorrow. She finished her cigarette, got up and doused the butt with water from the tap. Her phone buzzed, playing ‘Jism’ by Tindersticks. She glanced at the screen. Unlisted number. She picked up before the chorus.

‘One question,’ she said immediately, the soggy fag still in her hand. ‘What was my role in Needles’s case? Was Łukasz working for us, too? I have the right to know.’

‘I’ve never lied to you,’ Gramps replied. He was composed. His voice was less raspy than earlier. The background hiss was nearly inaudible. He must have used an inhaler before calling her back. ‘I had my orders. Besides, that was two questions.’

She breathed in.

‘Does Łukasz know?’

‘Even I don’t know everything,’ he started, but quickly trailed off. ‘You’re a mantis, you know?’

Sasza headed to the fridge and poured herself a glass of milk. She took a sip and waited.

‘So the Red Spider was a smokescreen, after all?’

‘I’ve been quite confident that this was the case, but after you left it wasn’t that obvious all of a sudden. Polak’s aunt, a famous director’s wife. One phone call was all it took. You know how it is. How things work. I’d wager it was Sońka, Karp’s bootlicker. He was in charge of the clean-up detail. Everything snowballed. The DI made sure the papers were clean. It was out of my hands.’

‘Was. He. Working. For. Us.’

‘You’ve had your question already.’

‘I’ll take that as a “yes”,’ she sighed. ‘You screwed me over.’

‘Not how I would have phrased it,’ he retorted, ‘but if you really have to know, I don’t think he was working for us.’

‘He’s still doing it,’ Sasza said. ‘You remember that case of the student from Tarnów who disappeared? Lidia Wrona.’

This was a case from three years ago, still unsolved. On the day of her disappearance Lidia Wrona had published an artsy photo on social media. It was easy to find on the web. All you had to do was type in: ‘Lidia Wrona, disappearance’. When Sasza had done just that, she froze. The Red Spider’s style was present and correct. Top-down perspective. A beautiful, painting-like frame. Contrasting colours, enhanced with Photoshop. Lidia lying on her back, wearing a red dress that looked like a spatter of blood over the lush green of grass.

The police had recently abandoned their last lead and the case had been dismissed, with no one under suspicion.

‘We don’t know that,’ Gramps said after a long pause. ‘I can only tell you the Spider didn’t work alone. He was never a sexual killer or a psychopathic maniac, like we suspected at first. The network of connections reached high, though. Very high. Higher than you suspect.’

‘Politics?’

‘If only. It was more of a . . .’ he hesitated, ‘a higher ideal.’

‘Blood and honour?’

‘Something of the sort, but not exactly.’

‘So it’s about money?’

‘It’s always about money, sweetheart.’

Sasza didn't know what to make of this. 'A higher ideal' could mean anything. She knew that despite official assurances about the Red Spider case being closed, the CBS* was still monitoring it and that as soon as they found anything new, they'd get the investigation back on track.

'Can you get me in?'

'No chance.' He reacted a bit too quickly.

'It's not that I don't want to,' he added.

'I don't drink any more.'

'I know, Sasza.'

She felt a twinge of pain at the sound of her name. He usually always called her by her official aliases: Milena or Thumbelina – or her badge number, 1189. Was this a good time to play the ace up her sleeve? But if she told Gramps she had him exposed, it might spook him. She took a piece of paper and started doodling a flowery mandala on it.

'I had to make a technician cough up some of her own cash for a portable drive so we'd be able to copy data from a suspect's PC,' Gramps continued. 'I knew we'd need something to cover our arses in court. But we had no official funding.'

'Incredible.' Sasza couldn't believe what she was hearing. Did the Polish police really have to worry about things like this? In the twenty-first century?

'That's what I told them,' Gramps agreed. 'Anyway, the search turned up squat. The PC was clean. That must have been the seventh cock-up like that this year, if I'm keeping count. Everyone's constantly a step ahead of us. Two years of working our fingers to the bone for nothing. I'm not sure, but I think someone might have tipped the perp off. Or maybe we were being bullshitted from the get-go. Anyhow, all I got was conjecture and a bunch of names. Famous names. Front-page names. As you can guess, nobody spilled. A few small fry who wanted to squeal suddenly bellied up in jail. "Suicide", of course.'

'And "accidents",' Sasza added. 'Typical.'

'So, as you can see, I haven't really got an argument for expanding the team.'

* Central Investigation Bureau of Police in Poland

'I can work for free,' she said. 'I want that profile.'

'Listen, I know you're good, I really do,' he said, 'but it's a top-secret case. Anyway, we've got no body. And you know what they say: no body, no—'

'—crime,' she cut in. '*Ex nihilo nihil fit*. But there's precedent. There have been a few cases when people have been sentenced before the body was found.'

'It's not that I don't trust you,' he said.

She didn't believe him. He was talking to her, though, and he never did anything without a reason. He'd told her much already, knowing that she could read between the lines. She realised he was taking a risk. Gramps was at an impasse. Maybe he was afraid for his position? Or maybe he already knew the high-ups were going to give the case to someone else. Someone who wouldn't have an issue with sweeping it under the rug. But Gramps kept talking. Maybe he suspected Sasza might come in handy soon and maybe they'd finally meet. It crossed her mind that Gramps's openness might have something to do with the recent election of the new prime minister. For the previous government, this case had been a priority and nobody seemed to have skimped on the expenses.

'You can just tell me,' she said.

'I've already said too much.'

'Just between you and me.'

'This is not a private conversation.' He suddenly seemed in a hurry. Was he afraid? Was the line tapped? Surely it was.

'Did you ever think that Łukasz Polak might be innocent?' she asked.

'You'd know that better than me. I didn't sleep with the guy for a week. He's not the father of *my* kid.'

She gritted her teeth for a moment, then went on, 'Maybe we had it wrong?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you think?' She didn't relent. 'I have Karolina now, and if they charged him wrongfully . . .' She paused, threw the soggy cigarette butt in the bin and headed to the window, looking at her own reflection.

'You know how much that means to me,' she went on. 'It would change everything. Not for me, per se, but it would mean the world

for my daughter. She's already asking for her father. What am I supposed to tell her? I know you understand. You have children yourself. Grandchildren.'

'It wasn't him,' he croaked. She heard the hiss of the inhaler. Her heart raced. 'Or at least not alone. He wasn't the mastermind, that's for sure. But he did have his fingers in it. If you ask me, he knows who's behind this.'

'Is?' she asked. 'This is still happening? I knew it!'

The photo: lush green grass, like an avocado. Red dress. Lidia's pale, full breasts. Red, curly hair. Dead eyes. The girl could be Sasza's younger sister. The similarity was striking. Why had it dawned on her only now? The hypothesis was far-fetched, but that was her job, wasn't it? She had to take every possibility into account. Even the possibility that the Red Spider had kidnapped her simply because she matched the profile of his victims. It couldn't be just a coincidence. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

'You know who the real Red Spider is, don't you?' she said.

Amazingly, she felt relieved. As if someone had taken a great weight from her shoulders. Could she still trust Gramps, though?

'Ask Polak.' He brushed the question off. 'Maybe you'll get an answer before they bump him off. I don't know about you, but I won't cry for him.'

He hung up. She dialled the number, but a voice told her it was temporarily unavailable. Nonetheless, she added it to her contacts as Kajetan Wróblewski – Gramps.

KOLA

(2000)

The hog was lying on the steel table with its trotters up. Its snout was crooked in a rictus grin, as if mocking its own disembowelled stomach. Mikołaj Nesteruk was just finishing gutting the animal. He shook off bits of intestine into a bucket standing next to the table and then shoved the bucket away with a foot. It spun but didn't topple. Good. He swept the sweat from his brow with a sleeve. He was in no mood for cleaning up. His wife would dress him down for slaughtering pigs in the garage anyway. She could always smell the blood afterwards. Everyone wants to eat meat, but when it comes to slaughter, gutting, and roasting there's suddenly no volunteers.

Back in the day, a man had to be able to slaughter and butcher a hog, a hare or a deer, although preparing a chicken had been a woman's job. An axe should always be kept sharp for that purpose. A dull axe-blade meant a landowner didn't properly care for their homestead, was a layabout, or drank to excess. A properly performed slaughter didn't cause too much pain; if the butcher knew his craft, death came quickly. But those times had gone. Nobody now had the slightest inkling about slaughtering, or about how to butcher a carcass – that you had to hang it on a hook for a while to let the blood out. And catch it all in a bucket without wasting a single drop. There ain't any proper men left in this world, Mikołaj grumbled under his breath.

It would take him a few hours to stuff the pig with buckwheat, lard and offal, get it into a hole in the ground and roast it. The wedding party guests would already be waiting, dressed in their freshly starched shirts and new dresses, for the special bus that would transport them to the restaurant.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang.

Mikołaj froze and listened to the ensuing silence. There was a road nearby. Probably just a flat tyre, he thought, and returned to his work. But the bang was soon followed by three more. Now Mikołaj was sure – gunshots. The forest was too far away; it definitely wasn't a poacher.

He walked to the water bucket and scrubbed his hands clean, then left the garage. The grey light of early morning limited his vision. He headed across the field, towards the road. He looked around. Nothing. But he wasn't the only one who had heard the sound. Lights were on in several houses. When he turned round to go back home, he noticed a silhouette. Someone was running towards him, hunched over.

'Help! Somebody help me!' A man. He fell to the ground and went still.

Mikołaj ran to the dark figure as fast as he could, although that wasn't saying much – he was getting on and couldn't run like he used to.

He reached the man. 'What happened?' he rasped, trying to catch his breath.

'Murder,' the man grated out. He raised his head.

'Petya?' whispered Mikołaj, shocked. He crouched down and pulled apart the lapels of the man's jacket. His shirt was soaked through with a thick, dark fluid.

'Who did this to you?'

'I couldn't see,' the man replied.

This had to be a gut shot. The man was bleeding like a wounded deer. Big-calibre gun, probably. A hunter's weapon? A rifle for hunting deer or bison. Home-made? One bullet had gone straight through the collarbone. The hole was wide enough to fit two fingers. The other rounds were probably still inside. Mikołaj knew what to do. During the war he had dealt with wounds like this. He took his shirt off, tore it into strips and tried to stem the squirting blood. He worked steadily for some time. Sweat dripped from his forehead, stinging his eyes. When he finally dressed the wound, the sun was already casting its first rays across the pinkish sky. The weather was going to be perfect again.

Mikołaj pushed himself to his feet, intending to head towards the buildings. He knew there was a phone at the old mill. The poor

sod needed help immediately if he was going to live. That's when the prone man shot out an arm, clutching desperately at Mikołaj's hand.

'Help her, Kola,' he whispered in Belarusian. 'There's a car over there. Łarysa is still there. Dead.'

Mikołaj raised his head and looked around. There was no car to be seen.

Gdańsk, 2014

The target moved with a clatter and a gust of air blew it upwards, like a kite. Sasza grabbed the lower right corner of the paper sheet, straightened it and counted the bullet holes. The corner of her mouth rose in a half-smile, but she kept quiet. She hit all her shots. All six in the lower part of the silhouette. Just as planned. The aggressor was incapacitated but alive. She put the revolver on the small felt-covered table and let the spent shells drop to the counter. It was Sasza's first time at a shooting range for eight years. She felt like she was back on her first training sessions – but then again, you never really forget how to ride a bike.

'Impressive,' the instructor praised her. 'What is that, a Glock? Or a Kalashnikov?'

Sasza took off her glasses. The earpieces, squished by the sound-dampening headphones, had been causing her some pain. Chief Inspector Robert Duchnowski was standing with his back to a wall plastered with instructional posters – 'How to incapacitate an aggressor'. He smiled approvingly, thumbs tucked into the pockets of his jeans. In those, and his chequered shirt and leather boots, he looked like someone straight out of a Western flick. At least he had got rid of that horrible braid, Sasza thought. His hair was short now, dishevelled, and, in spite of it having lost its natural deep brown colour and turned steel-grey, Ghost looked younger than when they had met after Needles's murder.

He reached out for a firearm catalogue and clicked his tongue dramatically.

'I'd prefer something better suited to a woman's hand,' Sasza grumbled. 'A little stinger.'

'A Beretta, maybe?' asked Duchnowski.

'Yeah, that'll do. I'll try again from longer range.'

She turned, estimating the distance. She could barely see the target from that far away, let alone the bullseye. She put her glasses back on.

'I counted on you saying that,' she heard him saying.

Sasza shook her head like a mother at a prankish little boy.

'Easily pleased, aren't you?' she retorted.

'Not true, but since you don't want to find out yourself . . . ?'
Ghost smirked, provocatively.

The instructor shot them a grossed-out glance from over the target.

'Ten metres is the standard range,' he told Sasza. He marked the previous hits with a marker pen. 'Twenty-five is the Olympic distance.'

'The customer's always right,' Ghost said, and pressed the green button on the console. The target whizzed all the way to the wall. The instructor fled to his cubicle.

In the next booth, a guy in cargo pants and a ripped vintage T-shirt was spewing shots from a machine gun, Rambo-style. His son, who must have been no more than thirteen, was waiting in line. The guy's wife, covered in colourful tattoos, sporting a clutter of blue-yarn dreadlocks and wearing barely more than a bikini, was listening to the metallic clangour of the spent shells cascading to the floor. She didn't seem at all impressed by the gun range. She was clearly a regular spectator at her hubby's little shooting show. Every now and then she fished in her purse for lip gloss and compulsively applied it to her already lustrous lips. In between, she would drop her eyes and vacantly gaze at the tips of her purple wedge-heeled shoes. Sasza studied her with interest, like an unusual weather phenomenon. For a while, she got lost in thought.

When she came back to the present, a Beretta 950 and a box of ammo were already lying on the table in front of her. She tried the diminutive gun in her hand. It was a perfect fit. Black, with a slightly worn grip. A little beauty, she caught herself thinking. She'd like to keep it. It suited her better than the previous ones. Being back at the shooting range was making her reminisce about the

time when gunplay had been her bread and butter. She had always been a natural when it came to sharpshooting. It suited her better than showing off with large-calibre cannons.

‘She’d be happy to find a place in your pocket.’ Ghost read her mind.

She shook her head. The decision was already made – she’d return to the firm and become a police officer again, focusing on profiling. A good shooting-range score was as important for an officer as a good food hygiene assessment for a restaurant. But other than that formality, she’d never use a gun again – not even for work. Her intellect would be her only weapon.

She loaded the gun and disengaged the safety, bracing in a wide-legged stance and relaxing her upper body. She locked her arms, lined up the sight and the target, and aimed the gun.

‘All right, you’ve got the baddie in your sight. Now, show us what you got,’ Ghost encouraged. She could barely hear him. The headphones were doing their job. ‘Left circle, three shots. The rest at the right one,’ he instructed.

She didn’t respond, but followed the order. After the very first shot, she knew it wasn’t going well. The lightweight Beretta puffed up a cute little gust of smoke with each shot, but was very unstable. And the more Sasza tried to focus, the more difficulty she had keeping the target in sight. She wanted to get this over with. Eventually the clip was empty. She squeezed the trigger again, just to be sure, then put the firearm back on the table. This time, Ghost examined the target himself.

‘It’s not all bad,’ he said, comfortingly. ‘Just take the machine gun now and let’s get this over with.’

She took a peek at the sheet and realised that she had actually only missed twice. Both were perfect head-shots. The rest had hit the body, just as Duchnowski had instructed her.

‘I killed him,’ she sighed.

‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.’ Ghost shrugged. ‘I didn’t realise you were that good.’

‘I haven’t shot a gun in years.’ The modesty was a facade – she was pretty happy with herself.

‘You don’t forget that. If you’re a fighter, that is,’ he said, grinning. ‘And *you* are a warrior. Just as I suspected.’

‘All-knowing and all-important, as always.’

‘That’s me, all right.’ He beamed.

She grabbed the Kalashnikov. The clip was old and prone to jamming. She broke a nail trying to load the last bullet, but at least her confidence was back. Only an utter knobhead wouldn’t be able to hit something with a machine gun, as her ex-boss used to say. Sasza tended to agree with the man. At first, she didn’t brace properly and the recoil made her shoot off-target, but she compensated swiftly. Her right shoulder would hurt like hell after that. It went pretty well, all things considered. With relief, she took the headphones off, briefly rubbed the skin behind her ears and tossed her glasses into her bag without looking for the case.

‘You can’t see a thing without those, can you?’ Ghost teased. She didn’t respond. He took her silence as confirmation.

‘Give me a cigarette, will you?’ she asked as they left the building. They shared it for a while. Sasza broke the silence first.

‘It went pretty well!’ she exclaimed, yanking at Duchnowski’s sleeve. ‘Come on, you have to give me that.’

He grimaced, though his eyes were smiling.

‘Maybe, if you do as well on Monday. I won’t be there for you,’ he replied, putting out the cigarette with the sole of his shoe. ‘You hungry?’

‘Are you saying I won’t make it without you?’ Sasza furrowed her brows. ‘And you didn’t have the balls to take me where the guys practise?’

She gestured to the building. It was the local gun club, huddled in the middle of a little pine wood. One of the walls boasted a large sign reading: ‘Wedding parties, first communions, banquets. Cheap and convenient!’ First you shoot a gun or two and then you get shit-faced at the party. Or the other way round, Sasza thought.

‘This place was on the way.’ Ghost was obviously lying. ‘You’ll show what you got on Monday and nobody will doubt that you’re ready to join the team.’

He wasn’t looking at her any more.

‘Wait. Wasn’t that supposed to be a done deal?’ Sasza could smell deception. She bristled. ‘So what were all those reports and applications for, then? I won’t suck up to anyone.’

‘I know,’ said Ghost, trying to placate her. ‘Though I’d like to see that. How does Sasza Załuska suck up to someone? That could be interesting to watch.’

She laughed. He was the first man in a long while who had made her do that. They had buried the hatchet some time ago, but their conversations still tended to sound like schoolboy banter. He had convinced her to return to the force, reminding her of all the advantages police life could offer. When they had promoted him to chief of the criminal investigations division, he’d booked a spot for her. She was supposed to get his old post. Chief Waligóra had no objections to it. He valued Sasza and sometimes even recommended her to other units. If it hadn’t been for Duchnowski’s and Waligóra’s proposal, Sasza wouldn’t even have thought about returning. She had filed the papers, done her basic training in the nearby town of Piła, and then easily passed all her advanced exams.

It’s always easier to leave than to return. Leaving is liberating, a bit like diving head-first into the sea. One quick decision and it’s done. To return is a bit like climbing up a sheer cliff. In Sasza’s case, it meant she had to prove herself all over again, demonstrate her worth.

Ghost wouldn’t be Ghost if he hadn’t made an additional condition. If she was to earn a place in his team, she had to pass all the trials she had always hated the most: fitness and shooting tests. She had passed the psychological evaluation with flying colours, of course. But that only made her feel the weight of the burden on her back. Waligóra and Duchnowski had vouched for her. She couldn’t fail their trust. She knew that, and it was only her natural pride that didn’t allow her to voice it. Anyway, either you do something properly, or you don’t do it at all – her motto, that. Life has a way of taking you down a peg or two at times, though. You can dream all you want, but sometimes you just have to fall back a few steps and pull yourself together. If something went wrong and they didn’t take her in, she wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.

All the things she had imagined she would do before she returned to Poland – all the commissions, court analyses and freelance jobs – had quickly fizzled out to nothing. If not for the loan she had got from her family, she wouldn’t have been able to make ends meet. In Poland, profilers weren’t allowed anywhere near the most important

investigations if they weren't working directly for the police. So, she had worked on some cases that paid better and some that paid less, but all those gigs had had one thing in common – they had been easy tasks that didn't require her to employ any more than a small percentage of her true potential. Sasza's talents were being wasted. She hadn't developed at all. She had felt her passion ebb. And, truth be told, she had simply missed the force. She wanted back in and had only realised that after the Staroń case – the last big investigation she had taken part in, which had allowed her the chance to prove herself again. It wasn't about the satisfaction, the adrenaline and the fact that she had been able to do what she loved. What she had always been good at. It was all about settling down.

Sasza wanted to finally put down roots. She wanted to feel the earth beneath her feet without it slipping away. She wanted to be able to look into the future and plan for it. She allowed herself to err. Nobody's perfect. But it was about regaining her honour, too. And there was no position better for that than the one she had lost it in in the first place.

'Let's go. You'll never see me suck up to anyone. Never.'

'Never say never.'

'I've just said it,' she replied, 'so what are you going to do about it?'

Ghost parked in the disabled spot and tucked a disabled sticker behind the windscreen. Sasza looked on with disbelief.

'Really, get a cane or something, at least,' she said.

'You're all the support I need.'

'I'm in no mood to be a part of your stupid show,' she snapped. 'They'll catch you soon enough.'

'Oh, but you're already part of it,' he replied and pushed a CBS contractor card – number 0184/2013 – into her hands. She stared at the plastic badge with amusement. The document was a fake. Sasza had never been a member.

'Where did you get my photo?'

'The mugshot database.' She knew he was lying.

'I hope they've got your DNA in there too.'

'Sure, several versions of it.'

She laughed, but kept him pinned with her eyes until he caved and answered truthfully.

‘The documents you’ve submitted, of course. I gave it to the secretary to scan and told her to prepare an ID. It’s not even illegal. Kinda.’

‘Thank you then, kinda.’ She tossed the card into her bag. ‘It’ll come in handy when I park at the station.’

They stopped at the pedestrian crossing. The traffic was sparse and Sasza wanted to cross on red, but Ghost grabbed her by the arm and made her wait.

‘Well, well, aren’t you a law-abiding citizen all of a sudden,’ she mocked him.

‘You got to have principles, I always say.’

‘One at least, yeah.’

‘Only one. I’m an unrepentant monogamist.’

The light turned green.

It was Saturday. Visiting day. A throng of women carrying paper-wrapped packages and leading children, wearing their best clothes, were waiting at the gate of the Kurkowa Street detention centre. Sasza and Ghost had a couple of things to take care of at the prison, individually. Duchnowski was visiting an informer at the men’s wing, and Sasza was seeing a woman. A week before, Marzena ‘the Wasp’ Koźmińska, one of Poland’s most infamous female murderers, had been transferred to Gdańsk prison. Sasza wanted to take advantage of this turn of events and talk to her again. When Koźmińska had been doing time at the Castle, the prison in Grudziądz, she had refused to let Sasza interview her on three different occasions. Now, she was about to testify in the trial of her ex-associate. Sasza suspected she was feeling down, as the man, Rafał Gromek, referred to by the press as the ‘Wąbrzeźno Electrician’, had already been given parole, was getting his case reviewed, and could hope for an early release. He had married a woman and had a child; he had someone to go back to and the family waiting at the gate scored him some points towards a positive evaluation on his social reintegration sheet.

Marzena, still considered one of the most dangerous inmates in Poland, had no hopes of even getting transferred to a low-security wing. Sasza intended to use all that to her advantage and coerce the prisoner into participating in her research project. Sasza’s

doctoral thesis was nearly finished. Professor Abrams hadn't even tried to hide his satisfaction with the results of her research, but if she could add Marzena's case, she'd surely get a grant. Sasza loved being the best.

They were led to the man lock, which was monitored by a couple of cameras. The room could house no more than three people at a time. The families of the inmates, waiting for their turn at the gate, screamed obscenities at Sasza and Ghost as the pair overtook them in the queue.

They sat on hard plastic stools without backrests, waiting in silence for the guards to process them. Ghost cracked his knuckles, knowing well enough that Załuska hated the sound it made. She fell for the provocation and snapped her head towards him. The chief inspector sent her an amused look, one brow raised. She couldn't read him.

'What?' she barked.

He dropped his head. She poked him in the gut with a finger and he pretended he was in pain.

'Talk.'

'You hungry?'

'You've already asked,' she said and shrugged. 'I don't know yet. What about it?'

'Maybe we could grab a pizza together later,' he said. 'Or something.'

'Or something?' She inclined her head playfully. 'Are you sucking up to me?'

'I sure am.' He beamed. 'How do you like it?'

She swallowed, blinked and felt herself blushing. That was a surprise. She couldn't control it.

'As soon as I get out of here I have to leave the city,' she whispered. 'I want to finish some stuff before I get to work in earnest. I have to do it now. Tomorrow at ten, to be precise.'

'Ten?' asked Ghost. He couldn't hide his disappointment. 'At ten I'll still be in bed. I intend to finally have a good night's sleep. I've got a really comfy bed, you know, but I've been so snowed under at work that it's pretty much my cross-eyed fat cat's now. And he can't even make proper use of it. Except the pissing, that is.'

He didn't manage to make her smile this time.

'Karo went to Crete with her grandmother,' Sasza continued. 'They send me pictures every day. They're having fun, it seems. I need to shut a certain door once and for all. And it's now or never.'

Ghost played with his car keys. She could see him growing sombre. He had wrongly interpreted her reply as rejection.

'It's personal,' she explained. 'I have to drive right across the country in the evening. To Hajnówka, near the Białowieża Forest. Eight hours, give or take, my GPS tells me. Two days and I'm back. And I'll happily grab dinner with you then, after that damned exam. Maybe. But don't count on me jumping into your bed.'

They stared at each other in silence, then smiled at the same time.

'Denied again,' sighed Ghost, pretending to be hurt. His eyes were sparkling, though.

'I'll get this done in a jiffy,' she said.

Duchnowski reached out a hand. She tensed, trying to calm her racing heart, but as soon as he put his enormous, bony paw on her hand she felt the tips of her ears flushing. He only touched her for the briefest moment, very delicately. As soon as he withdrew his hand, she realised he'd left the 9mm Beretta from the gun club in her palm. She was lost for words.

'I didn't steal it,' Ghost said and giggled. This greying forty-five-year-old had something mischievous in him, like a kid, she thought. There had been a time when she couldn't find anything charming about him. Had he changed that much? Or had *she* undergone some kind of metamorphosis?

'It was my father's. A family heirloom,' he explained. 'I brought it for you.'

'I don't carry,' she protested half-heartedly. 'I don't have to.'

He had obviously been counting on a different reaction. Her lack of excitement clearly dumbfounded him.

'You'll get to practise before the test. So, what's it gonna be?'

'What's it gonna be?'

'It's a gift,' he said with finality. 'An overdue one. Christmas. Kinda.'

'What about the permit?'

'All ready and waiting on my desk,' he said and winked. 'I don't have any ammo, though.'

'I always take my time to get used to new things.' She weighed the Beretta in her hand and then placed it in her lap, her eyes never leaving the weapon. 'When I bought a washing machine I stared at it like an idiot for, like, two weeks before I even turned it on. It's good you don't have ammo. I wouldn't use it, anyway.'

'Not even a little?'

Her lips stretched in a smile and she repeated Duchnowski's words, imitating the timbre of his voice:

'Not even a little. Kinda.'

Ghost opened his other hand and deftly stuck it into her pocket, releasing the handful of bullets he had been hiding from her, like they were candy.

'I was kidding. Seems I'm a bit of a hoarder after all.' He leaned closer to Sasza's ear. She could smell his cologne, his skin and cigarette smoke. It made her head spin. She couldn't focus. When he spoke, she felt his warm breath on her earlobe. He was so close, his lips nearly touching her skin. 'I've removed the evidence, don't you worry. *Nas nye dogonyat.*' 'Not Gonna Get Us'. The title of a pop song, a huge hit.

Sasza snorted with laughter and did her best not to hug the great oak of a man.

'That's so cute,' she squealed.

'I know,' he said proudly. 'That's why you'll be such a great match.'

Now both of them felt awkward. Sasza retreated to a safe distance, tucking the Beretta into her pocket. They both sighed with relief when finally the small window of the guard room opened and they were called to the gate.

The guardsman gave them their papers and ID badges. A while later a woman joined him, introducing herself as a major. Sasza didn't hear her name. She was still too confused by Ghost's behaviour. He had clearly been flirting with her. And what was even worse was that she'd liked it. She dropped her head and took a moment to gather her wits.

The major, the *capo di tutti capi* of the women's prison wing, wore snow-white stockings and her blond hair coiled in plaits, like Helga from the old TV programme 'Allo 'Allo, which Sasza immediately mentally christened her. Sasza couldn't help imagining the woman

in a dominatrix outfit, hefting a whip. She must have looked like a Viking queen in her day, but since then she had gained weight and the only sign of her erstwhile grandeur was the overbearing feeling of discipline she exuded. She was methodically arranging plastic containers on the counter.

‘Weapons, gas, mobile phones, please.’

Sasza put the Beretta into one of the boxes, carefully transferring all the ammunition from her pocket. Ghost tossed his Glock in, too. It looked like the guardsman from the men’s wing was a little less of a stickler, or maybe the inmate the chief inspector was visiting wasn’t as dangerous, because while Sasza was even deprived of her nail file and a pack of plasters, Ghost’s warden only lazily pointed to his cowboy-style belt buckle but, astonishingly, didn’t make him take it off, instead inviting him to the barred door leading to the men’s ward. Meanwhile, Helga scrutinised each and every piece of Sasza’s attire.

Ghost was already vanishing down the corridor, assisted by a couple of prison guards, while Helga was still analysing Sasza’s biker boots.

‘It’s not as if I have a hidden knife or something,’ Sasza grumbled, but she meekly took off her boots and placed them on the X-ray machine.

‘Don’t be late!’ called Ghost as he rounded the corner. ‘Monday, eight o’clock. The next transfer window opens in autumn. But don’t worry. In the afternoon we’ll celebrate you joining the family. At least I hope I’ll be in a condition to celebrate – Wally’s organising a late birthday party the day before and he’s already bought each guest a pint of Duch Puszczy. Promise you’ll be there!’

‘We’ll see.’ Sasza wiggled her toes. She was still standing barefoot, and to say the prison floor was pristine would be a gross overstatement. She turned back to Helga and made an attempt at humour: ‘Seems I’m visiting Hannibal Lecter himself, eh?’

‘Quite so,’ replied Helga, not taking her eyes off the contents of Sasza’s bag. She paused the screen of the X-ray machine and pointed to a spike-like object. Sasza fished it out. It was a keyholder. She raised it so the woman could see. Helga snatched it swiftly, turning it this way and that in her fingers as if it could have housed a hidden gun, finally placing it in the deposit box.

‘Alcohol, drugs?’

Sasza gave her an ironic look, but if Helga was able to read the expression, she didn’t show it, instead continuing her methodical work. She unfastened the strap from Sasza’s handbag, wrapped it around her palms and tried it out as a potential suffocation tool. Sasza heard the clanking of the buckle as the woman tightened the strap. Nothing surprised her any more. She’d been to every Polish prison housing murderers, and a search as thorough as this was unprecedented. Even when Helga took out a can of body spray, took the lid off and sprayed a thick cloud of mist, taking a deep sniff and grimacing, the smell apparently not to her liking, Sasza kept still, eyes fixed on the warden in an impassive stare.

‘What about this?’ asked Helga, pointing to a long, pointy object on the screen.

‘That’s a pencil. The lead’s broken.’

‘I won’t let you in with that,’ barked Helga.

She tossed the pencil into the box. The same went for a lighter, a roll of duct tape, some chewing gum, and a notebook.

‘A notebook? Really?’ Sasza finally snapped. ‘That’s a bit over the top, don’t you think?’

Helga pointed to the items lying in the box and replied with a straight face: ‘Belt: attempted strangulation of an inmate. Lighter, body spray, duct tape, chewing gum: a flamethrower. My colleague is still recovering from her burns. Pencil and notebook: attempted blinding.’

Amused, Sasza took the pencil and jabbed it at the air, pretending to stab someone in the eyeball.

‘Like that?’

Helga took the pencil, sharpened it, rubbed the lead vigorously all over a page of the notebook with her finger, swept the excess off and made a gesture of grinding the graphite into her eye.

‘Thirteen people since they brought her in,’ she said. ‘Nobody wants to share a cell with her. All she does is mill around, acting the clown, and then, out of the blue – an assault. Doesn’t even matter who she gets hold of.’ She dragged a finger across her throat.

Sasza’s smirk vanished.

‘But she’s been doing time for years now. There haven’t been any complaints lately, have there? I was close to interviewing her in Grudziądz.’

Helga only shrugged. Her face took on an expression of pity, although it might have also been an attempt at a smile.

‘Want me to come with you?’

‘No, it’s all right.’

‘Better if I transfer her to the dangerous inmates’ room,’ Helga decided.

She took the deposit box and was about to leave, but then she changed her mind mid-stride and asked for the whole handbag. She only allowed Sasza her boots. As Sasza was putting them on, a walkie-talkie crackled. The warden immediately reported her whereabouts.

‘An accident at the sewing room,’ the speaker spat. ‘Senior guard, sector P, to exit number twenty-three, please. We have injured inmates.’

‘I’ll lead a guest in and will take over asap.’

They headed to the security door.

At the end of a long, windowless corridor there was a flight of stairs, and then a passageway to the next building. That’s where they stopped. They could already hear the calls and bawls of agitated inmates. Helga entered a set of numbers on a keypad at the door. The gate clicked but they didn’t move. Suddenly a cigarette butt fell from somewhere up high, right in front of Sasza. She picked it up and, ignoring the warden’s condemning glare, put it out on the wall and flicked it to the windowsill. Raising her eyes again, she noticed a group of women at the top of the stairs ahead of them. They were of a variety of ages, looks and body types. Some of them had bandages on.

‘Ah, there they are. My princesses,’ the jailer said softly.

Sasza shot a quick glance at the prisoners. They, in turn, were keeping their eyes fixed on Sasza like bulls ready to charge a matador’s red cloak. One of them, the youngest and prettiest, gave a long whistle. And though the insubordinate inmate was immediately pacified with a smack of a baton to her lower back, the rest clearly read it as a signal to attack. Someone snickered mockingly from the second row. Someone else growled angrily. A large, shaggy-haired and sweaty woman stepped to the front of the group. There was a wide bandage wrapped around her arm. The wound must have been fresh; the gauze was soaked through and a thin trickle

of blood was making its way down her arm, nearly reaching her elbow. The woman seemed to pay it no heed. She locked her hands behind her neck and rolled her eyes, making obscene movements with her hips.

‘Quit showing off, Janet.’ The prison guard stuck the tip of her baton under the inmate’s chin. ‘Nobody’s impressed.’

The woman withdrew meekly. Meanwhile, more women were descending the stairs. They couldn’t all fit in the passageway, so Helga gestured for them to move closer to her and Sasza. An instant later Sasza was completely surrounded by inmates. They took up the entire space. She could hear them whispering among themselves. Some were pointing at her. Only those lowest in the hierarchy stood immobile, their apathetic faces showing nothing at all.

‘Pretty one,’ someone called from the back of the throng. ‘Why don’t we take her with us?’

Sasza tried to ignore the comments, though it wasn’t that easy. She knew they were just bored witless and killing time. They didn’t really have anything against her. But when she felt someone’s hand groping at her crotch, she instinctively took a quick step backwards, face contorted in a grimace of fear. That was clearly what the owner of the groping hand had intended, as the gesture won her a bout of raucous laughter. The large woman with the bandaged arm suddenly appeared out of nowhere, right in front of Sasza.

‘Lookie here, pretty princess,’ she said and smiled amiably. Sasza suddenly realised just how enormous the woman was. She towered over her. She must have been close to two metres tall. Suddenly, with a theatrical gesture she ripped the dressing from her arm, demonstrating the fresh marks of what looked like self-mutilation. ‘They don’t give us any free time, the bitches!’

The guardswoman who had led the inmates from the sewing room came to Sasza’s rescue.

‘Enough, Janet,’ she said, wearily. ‘Get back in line.’

She signed a document and transferred the herd to Helga, who led the women out to the courtyard. Not one of the inmates seemed to dare to speak, but Sasza knew she would be hearing their whispers for a long while yet. The other guard was nicer. She even smiled a bit. She searched Sasza again, then led her to a small room divided in half by a transparent wall.

Marzena Koźmińska, the killer Sasza had wanted to interview for so long, was already waiting on the other side of the plastic wall. At first glance she didn't look dangerous. She looked normal, like dozens of people you see on the streets every day. Smoking their cigarettes, talking on their phones and pushing their prams. It was hard to guess her age. She looked like your typical, slightly scruffy, auntie, grandma or mother. She might be any of those herself, come to think of it. Thin, shapely, brown-haired, unremarkable. The slightly crossed eyes only made her more appealing. She wore cheap glasses patched with duct tape and had a modest page-boy-style hairdo. Worn slippers and white socks on her feet. The legs of her orange uniform, marking her out as a dangerous inmate, were rolled all the way up to her knees. Her legs were stick-thin, snow-white and clean-shaven.

Sasza wouldn't have pegged her as a murderer if she'd met her anywhere else. Koźmińska didn't resemble the blond-haired red-neck she remembered from photos from the investigation that commenced days after she had murdered a high-school student in Warsaw. But it was her. The brains of the gang. The Wasp. The first and only Polish woman sentenced to life without any possibility of parole. She had quit education after high school, but psychological testing pointed to her IQ being very high – close to 178. If she had stayed at school, she would have probably easily graduated from university. She was a talented strategist, a natural leader and a gifted speaker. A diagnosed psychopath, too.

Marzena came from a dysfunctional family. She had been accustomed to aggression and violence since she was a child. That was the only life she knew. Until she was finally caught, crime had just been her way. The death blows hadn't been her doing; in fact she hadn't even touched any of the murder weapons herself, only ever participating in the torturing as a spectator. Always at the back, always taking care that her orders were fulfilled to the letter. The killings had always been committed by men – her lovers or men aspiring to become such. For years she had been too smart to get caught. Investigators said that she must have committed numerous offences, but they could only ever prove a single one. And she had never claimed responsibility.

'I don't agree,' she said now without preamble, grinning at her guest, displaying a gap in place of one of her front teeth.

Sasza sat down on a stool. She didn't know what to do with her hands so she stuck them into the pockets of her jacket. She could feel the pack of R1 cigarettes sitting in the back pocket of her jeans, digging into her buttock. She moved it to her breast pocket. The guard had taken her lighter but the room was a no-smoking zone anyway and the camera's eye didn't leave her for even a moment.

'What don't you agree to?' Sasza didn't intend to play nice. She did feel a slight tingle of unease in her neck, though.

Sasza wasn't here to plead – her plan was to shake Marzena up a bit, make her lose the veneer of calm she hid behind and try to provoke her into taking off the mask of the Wasp. At least for a while. Then she'd think of something else. But first, Sasza had to make sure it was even worth it to expend her energy on the woman.

'I agree to nothing,' Marzena snapped from behind the glass wall. 'I'm innocent.'

'So we're both wasting our time?' Sasza took her hands out of her pockets. She noticed a black smudge on her wrist, rubbed it off and pointed to the bulletproof window cubicle around the woman. 'So why are you inside that?'

Marzena raised her chin defiantly. 'You studied Szymon,' she said. 'She's my good mate.'

'She did pretty well.'

'You paying?'

Sasza shook her head. 'But I can arrange for some coffee and cigarettes for you. Movies, books. Whatever you need. I'm a scientist.'

'Bullshit.'

Sasza flinched.

'You're a cop. I can feel it.'

'Does it matter?'

Marzena sat back more comfortably. She undid the top two buttons of her orange uniform, revealing a green flowery undershirt, tight around her large, shapely breasts. Maybe that had been her secret weapon. Through the deep cleavage, Sasza noticed a scar. From a self-inflicted wound? The bruise looked infected. Revolting.

'You lied to the girls. They're pretty pissed off. They didn't want to talk to the pigs.'

'The situation was different . . .' Sasza began, but thought better of it. She didn't have to explain herself to an inmate.

Marzena pulled out a crumpled photo from a pocket and held it against the window. It showed two women, one of them not very remarkable, the other attractive. Both were slim, tanned and smiling. A man had his arms around them both. He wore a golden Omega watch or at least a pretty good fake. He was handsome, middle-aged. In the foreground, on a table, a bottle of Russian *Igristoje* champagne, a couple of crystal glasses and a half-eaten smoked mackerel partially wrapped in paper.

'That's me.' Marzena pointed to the less attractive woman. Then she slid her finger to the other one. 'This is Monika Zakrzewska. But everyone used to call her Jowita. She's off the grid. You following me?'

Sasza had read Marzena's files and knew about the pretty girl in the photo. She had been working with Marzena in a local whorehouse in Warsaw's Bródno district. They had been friends. One day a white Mercedes, the 'four-eyed' type, model W210, drove up to Monika's mother's house. She took her child and they both got in and the car drove away, never to return. Vanished into thin air. Years later, during the investigation into the murder of the high-school student in Warsaw, her story came up again. One of Marzena's associates had made a deal with the police in exchange for a shorter sentence. He had testified that Marzena used to brag about hiring someone to kill her friend for stealing her boyfriend. Monika's body had never been found.

'Who's that guy?' Sasza pointed to the Pierce Brosnan wannabe in the photo.

'I don't know his name. But I bet he knows who topped Monika. I want you to find that guy and tell him I said hello.'

A silence fell over the room.

'Three teams worked that case,' Sasza said after a long while. 'How am I supposed to crack it on my own, after such a long time?'

'You're a cop, no? You help me, I get you the info you need to get that Nobel prize or whatever they give to psychiatrists.'

Sasza stood up.

'Not gonna fly. And I'm a psychologist. There's a difference.'

For a while, Marzena looked disappointed. A few seconds, no more. Quickly, it turned into anger.

'I know things I haven't told *anyone*,' she hissed, slapping her thighs. She continued, quickly, raising her voice: 'I got that photo only recently. I paid a pretty penny for that scrap of paper. I work in the sewing room here. They pay me eighty *groszy* per rag I make! It's barely enough for smokes and tampons. I mean, I did work there until recently. They ditched me. I'm only going apeshit because I've nothing to lose. I'm not worried about myself. I can bite the dust for all I care. I'm never getting out of here anyway. But I have kids. Alive, out there, outside. Zakrzewska's mother, that old bitch, keeps giving them a hard time. She'll destroy them and I can't do a thing. I want that sow to fuck off. I didn't kill her bitch of a daughter, though God knows I had plenty of opportunities to off that cunt.'

Sasza raised her hand, cutting Marzena off. They sat in silence for a while.

'I'll help you find the man,' the inmate whispered.

'Why do you care?'

'Cause I'm innocent.' Marzena was in control again. Her nonchalant manner was back. 'I've got nothing to do with this. I've done some things, true, but not this.'

Sasza sat down again.

'Stop talking out of your arse and maybe I'll help you.' She smirked. 'What's this really about?'

Marzena was clearly considering whether she should keep up the self-righteous act or just tell the truth.

'I don't count on getting justice,' she said. 'I just want the guy to come and visit. Let him know I have the photo and want to talk. He'll come.'

Sasza couldn't believe her ears. Was the Wasp finally being straight with her?

'So you want me to be your errand boy?'

Marzena shrugged. 'If that's not too much in exchange for the beast's confession for your paper.'

'Words mean nothing,' Sasza retorted. 'How can I be sure you'll talk?'

'You can't,' the Wasp replied, simply. 'In principle, I don't do deals with the devil. But I can give you my word.'

Sasza's chuckle visibly hurt Marzena.

'I've never made a promise I couldn't back up. I got standards.'

'Oh, I bet you do,' Sasza muttered. 'Yet somehow I still don't believe or trust you. I highly doubt that will change.'

Marzena took a deep breath and said: 'Listen up, because I won't repeat myself. If you don't find him, I'll find another way. You're not the only one who wants to rake me for my secrets and make some cash out of it.'

'I'm not doing this for the money,' Sasza protested.

'Aren't you?' The Wasp cocked her head with a sly smile. 'What about the fame and glory? The grants? The back-patting? You don't fool me. Won't a doctorate raise your salary? There's nothing in this life better at making you feel free than money. It's the only thing that counts. If you're rich, they let you be a nutter, a fool . . . or a killer. You're untouchable.'

'So why won't you sell your story? Write a book, sell movie rights. There are dozens of publishers without scruples in Poland. They'll get you a crafty journo with the same outlook on financial matters as yours and they'll happily play their part. Your name will be on the first page above theirs and they won't care. A book like that would be a bestseller. You only got to give it a fancy title. How about "The Bloody Queen's Testament". You'll be famous again,' Sasza taunted.

Marzena missed the irony, taking the mockery as advice.

'I might just do that,' she said, growing calmer, and opened up: 'There isn't a week without someone from the TV knocking at my door. No one's offered the right amount of money, though. Listen, you're here, we both want the same thing. Why don't we make a deal? The price ain't high. At least, I don't think it is. I'm telling the truth. Fuck it, believe me when I say I'd like it to be bullshit. But it isn't. I couldn't care less about who topped Jowita and who's going to take the heat for that. I need money to pay off Jowita's mother. Peace can be bought, you know? If you have the cash.' She stopped and fixed Sasza with a stare. She pointed a finger at her. 'You a mother?'

Sasza nodded reluctantly. Marzena was going to change her tune. She was going to try to make Sasza pity her now. Sasza believed herself to be ready to screen out the performance and focus on the truth.

‘My oldest daughter is pregnant. I’ll be a grandma. As soon as the neighbours discovered that my children’s mother is me, they made their lives hell. As if they’re somehow to blame for what I did. I know life’s not a walk in the park, but I won’t let them destroy my kids’ lives like they fucked up mine.’

Sasza couldn’t help but feel pity. She wasn’t looking at a psychopath any more, but a desperate mother. Locked up in a cage, lashing out because she had never experienced kindness herself. She was only trying to survive. Marzena could be a case for a whole separate research paper. The woman had a soft underbelly and Sasza would have loved to dissect her.

‘I’ll think about it,’ she said.

Marzena shook her head. ‘You don’t believe me.’

‘What did you expect?’ Sasza snorted. ‘Prisons are full of innocent people.’

The woman was a good actress: her face was a mask of genuine regret. When she spoke, her voice broke.

‘But I really didn’t kill her. The evidence was all circumstantial. They pinned that kidnapping on me after I killed that student. Yeah, I picked her up from her house, but I didn’t kill her. I didn’t appeal against the decision. I couldn’t afford a lawyer. And now it’s too late.’

‘What you’re expecting me to do is impossible.’ Sasza unzipped her jacket. The pack of cigarettes fell to the ground. She caught Marzena’s look. The woman was devouring the smokes with her eyes. Sasza pulled one out, playing with it and observing the inmate’s reaction out of the corner of her eye. Then, she slid it back into the pack. ‘Some investigations remain unsolved, you know,’ she said. ‘And I’m not a psychic. You don’t even know the man’s name. Or you don’t want to tell me. And besides, what does he have to do with Jowita? And you?’

‘If they would let me out, I’d have found that prick. He knows. Maybe he even did it himself.’

Marzena clammed up. There was no trace of the desperate mother any more. She was the Wasp again.

‘How did you get that photo?’ Sasza asked. ‘Who sold it to you? I need a name.’

Marzena didn’t reply. She jotted down a court file number on the back of the photograph and then slid it to Sasza through a slit in the window.

‘Have a read,’ she asked gently. ‘You’ll be back. I’m very patient. But my children don’t have much time. Help them if you can.’

Sasza took the photo. The file number was easy to memorise. The case had been referred to the court in 2001. She flipped the photo and took another look at the three people. The brown-haired man sitting in the middle had to be at least forty, but he was that rare breed of man who would look handsome even in a ripped T-shirt. Monika was clinging to him. The man was glancing at Marzena, though. Or, more accurately, into her cleavage. Marzena was no beauty, but she had charisma. The photo did justice to her magnetism. It also caught the daggers in her eyes. Those two didn’t trust each other, but there was something between them. A connection. And it was much stronger than whatever affection was between the gigolo and the disappeared beauty. Monika had been trusting, cute. The perfect trophy for those two predators. Sasza recalled an old saying: three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead. What secret linked those three? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

‘Don’t lose it,’ said Marzena. ‘I don’t have a copy. We called him Four-Eyes. He drove that Mercedes. E-class, W210. White, like a wedding limo. The guy would show up every now and then and then vanish. At times he would be away for months. But then he’d come a few times a week. Back in the day, there weren’t a lot of people who could afford a car like that. Our customers drove Fiats or got around by tram. We were no call girls.’

Sasza mulled it over. If Marzena was telling the truth, she had just given Sasza the only lead she had. Was she bluffing? What did she want to use her for? Sasza was certain the Wasp would agree to the interview. But she had to give her something in return. Otherwise the woman would just turn around and leave. All right, Sasza would read the file. After all, why not? It may even prove interesting.

'I can't promise anything,' she said and rose.

Marzena shrugged. She had what she wanted. The line was cast, but would she catch the fish she wanted? Nothing was certain. But you have to know when to loosen the line so it doesn't snap. That moment came now. There's nothing worse for a business deal than overselling the product.

'Leave a couple of smokes, will you? They won't confiscate them. I have a deal with the warden.'

The slit beneath the window was too thin to fit the entire pack, so Sasza took the cigarettes out one by one, flattening them with a palm and sliding them through the same way Marzena had handed her the photo. One of the cigarettes broke and the tobacco spilled on the counter. Marzena shot a quick glance at the camera, then carefully collected the spilled contents to the last speck.

'How did you know I was police?' Sasza asked as she prepared to leave.

Marzena, occupied with hiding the smokes in a secret pocket, didn't respond at once but eventually said, 'You've got gunpowder on your fingers.'

Sasza took a look at the spot where the black smudge had been. There was no trace now of the mark left from her visit to the gun range. Marzena laughed bitterly. 'You're a bitch, all right, but you're no pure-breed. One good bluff and you buckle.'

Sasza didn't buy it. The Wasp wasn't one to improvise. She had to have checked her dossier before the meeting. She had done her homework. Better watch out for her. Sasza had never researched such an interesting person.