

**THE
RUSSIAN
LEGACY**

A Thomas Constantine Mystery

T.D. FREIBERG

ALSO BY T.D. FREIBERG

The Genesis Resolution

The Codex

THE RUSSIAN LEGACY

by T.D. Freiberg

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For Howard and Joanne Olhausen

"There are currently about 30 terrorist attacks per day in this tiny country of 5.2 million Jews. What if there were 30 terrorist attacks per day in Chicago or Los Angeles or Paris or London?"

—Maoz Israel Report

PROLOGUE

Netivot, Israel

Tuesday, September 9th

THE WIRY WOMAN in her sixties flitted from cutting block to sink to stove like a hummingbird flying from flower to flower. The scent of baking *challah* filled the air as strings of steam rose from a pot on the stove. Nestled between Gaza and Beersheba, the small home in Netivot was a potpourri of aromas.

“Everything will be fine,” Rachel said. Fresh from a good night’s sleep in her childhood bedroom, daughter Rachel took charge of the pot simmering on the stove. In her late twenties, Rachel had just graduated from Tel Aviv University with a degree in education. She had delayed her education to complete two years of compulsory military service, rising to the rank of tank commander, and was looking forward to fulfilling her dream of becoming a teacher.

Today was a special day. Rachel’s fiancé, Yossi, would be arriving shortly from Herzliya to discuss their upcoming wedding. Everyone’s nerves were a bit on edge.

“It is a special day,” Rachel’s mother, Sara, responded, “and *cholent* is your father’s favorite dish. It must be just right.” Sara smoothed the front of her apron with the palms of her hands. Her mother and grandmother had taught her

that food stains on an apron were acceptable but wrinkles were not.

Rachel continued to stir the cubed beef stew of potatoes, beans, eggs, and barley that her mother had started the previous evening. "It will be perfect, like all your meals." The kitchen in her parents' twenty-year-old house was bright, clean, and cheerful. Unlike the other homes in their neighborhood, it had been recently remodeled and updated with the latest stainless steel Bosch appliances. Rachel thought that the bright metallic fronts made the rest of the home's furnishings look dated, but she kept that opinion to herself.

Sara peeked in the oven, checked the browning on the braided bread, and wiped her hands on the apron covering her long black dress. She hugged her daughter. "We are so happy for you. Your father does not show it, but he thinks the world of Yossi."

Rachel put her spoon down and returned the hug. "When you met father . . . I mean, how did you know? I do not feel the way I thought I would feel."

"All brides-to-be have the same feeling. I was still having second thoughts when Avi broke the glass at our wedding! You will make Yossi a wonderful wife and the two of you will bless us with many grandchildren."

"I hope so," Rachel replied, wiping an emotional tear from her eye.

The front doorbell chimed. "That will be Yossi. Welcome him while I tend to the challah."

* * *

"SHALOM." YOSHI COHEN looked into Rachel's dark

brown eyes, wrapped his arm around her neck, and gave her a passionate kiss.

"Yossi, please," Rachel whispered. "My mother is in the kitchen!"

"What? We have been sleeping together for two years. She knows that."

"Shush! We do not speak of such things. How was the drive from Herzliya?"

"I made the mistake of taking Highway 6 through Beersheba instead of the coast road. I thought it would be faster. Herzliya to Beersheba was a breeze but the stretch from Beersheba to Netivot was terrible, truck after truck, and traffic barely moved."

"We are only five kilometers from Gaza. The government is restricting border crossings. It has created a huge bottleneck."

"I suspected as much. I never foresaw a Hamas win in Gaza."

"No one did. Come into the kitchen. I must help my mother with dinner." Rachel grabbed Yossi's hand and led him through a small living room into the combination kitchen-and-dining area.

"Shalom, Sara," Yossi said, giving Rachel's mother a hug. "I always thought my mother was a great cook, but our kitchen has never smelled this good."

Sara and Rachel both beamed at the compliment.

"Shalom," came a shout from the front entrance. Rachel's father was home.

"In the kitchen, Avi," Sara responded.

Yossi jumped to his feet and hurried to greet Aviram. "Shalom, Aviram. *Ma shlomcha?*" he asked, offering a firm handshake.

"*Ha kol b'seder,*" Aviram responded. "Nice to see you, Yossi." Rachel's father shook Yossi's hand, drawing him close for a hug. The two men continued to the kitchen where Aviram kissed his wife and daughter. He shed his work jacket and turned to Yossi. "Scotch?"

"Yes, sir, please."

Aviram poured two glasses of Glenfiddich, gave one to Yossi, and motioned for Yossi to follow him to the home's living room. "*L'chaim,*" he said, settling into his favorite chair.

"*L'chaim,*" Yossi responded, raising his glass.

"I assume you joined your father's firm and will be practicing corporate law?" Aviram probed.

"I did join my father's firm, but I talked my father into letting me branch out into criminal law."

"There is no money in criminal cases." Aviram's brow scrunched, expressing concern at his future son-in-law's career choice.

"It will be challenging at first, but in five or ten years it could be a major portion of our business."

"How many people does your father employ?"

The in-your-face interrogation was to be expected. Yossi came from an upscale Conservative Jewish family—a family that honored the old traditions but embraced modernity. Aviram was a strict Orthodox Jew. Yossi knew that Rachel had grown up in a family that spent the entire Sabbath in prayer and reading the Torah. The home's television was unplugged and the light bulb in the refrigerator was turned off! There could be no use of electricity on the Sabbath. Dinner was held in candlelight. Aviram was also *Sabra*—native born. The combination of being both Orthodox and *Sabra* gave Aviram a sense of superiority. Yossi accepted

Aviram's stare in stride and responded. "We just opened a second office in Tel Aviv. We now have eleven attorneys and five support staff. And you? Rachel tells me that you have expanded?"

"I now have two trucks on the road plus mine. There will always be a need for air conditioning when you live in the desert."

Rachel entered the room and sat next to Yossi.

Yossi looked at her and sucked in a breath. "We were hoping to talk with you about our wedding plans. We would like to be married in Herzliya."

"Out of the question." Aviram's right hand shot up in the air with his fingers pressed together. "There are plenty of fine places to get married in Beersheba!"

"Father," Rachel interrupted, "listen to Yossi. We have a compromise to offer."

Yossi continued, "We know that a Herzliya wedding would be very costly. If you would agree to hold the ceremony there, my parents would pay more than half of the wedding costs."

Aviram turned red and thrust up both of his hands with fingers pinched tight. "Is your family too proud to come to Beersheba or are you ashamed that I do not drive a Mercedes like your father?"

"Father!" Rachel stood up. "You are being Sabra stubborn! It was you who rejected Yossi's parents' initial offer to pay for half of the wedding. You do not need to impress anyone. All of our friends live in Tel Aviv and some of Yossi's relatives are quite elderly. They would not be able to make the trip to Beersheba."

"I meant no disrespect," Yossi added. "It was a proposal. If you would consider our family's needs, my father would

help by absorbing the extra cost of having the wedding held closer to Tel Aviv.”

Sirens located throughout Netivot began to wail. Aviram sprang from his chair to gather his wife and daughter into the home’s cellar. As Yossi followed, he felt more than heard a thunderous explosion. His ears popped. The last image his eyes captured was a crack in the ceiling that preceded the home being blown apart.

* * *

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD AHMAD ZAHAR, a Palestinian born in Gaza, lived his childhood knowing only Zionist occupation, curfew, intifada, and liberation. Never allowed to picnic with his family by the sea or pick grapes and oranges with his friends in the open fields surrounding his home, Ahmad struggled to understand the repressive regulations that restricted his freedom and kept him in his bedroom by seven every evening.

When his public school closed due to lack of funds, Ahmad and his five siblings were welcomed at a new training center built by Hamas. At this free establishment, he was lectured daily from the Quran on the supremacy of Islam and his obligation to exterminate anyone holding a different belief, particularly the Jews. Ahmad was taught that it was the duty of all Palestinians to engage in a *jihad* against the infidels occupying his country. A good student, Ahmad learned how to conceal an explosive vest, handle a rifle, and fire various mortars and rockets.

“*Allahu Akbar*,” Ahmad said, his eyes beaming with pride. He handed the spent missile launcher to his older brother. Standing on the roof of an abandoned building next to his home, it took fifteen seconds for the dull thud of the

explosion to reach his ears.

* * *

IN THE WEALTHY beachfront district of Herzliya Pituah, Yossi's parents, Ariel and Johanna, were preparing to retire for the evening. Ariel switched the TV in the bedroom to Channel 2 for the latest news. The camera was panning from a reporter to a smoldering pile of rubble. Ariel turned up the volume. ". . . believed to be a Russian, man-portable, Igla-S missile fitted with a high-energy fragmentation charge, that hit this home in Netivot just before sunset, killing an Israeli contractor, his wife, daughter, and a yet unidentified male. This was the 583rd missile or mortar attack on Israel launched from the Gaza Strip this year. Israeli officials have responded by . . ."

Johanna began sobbing uncontrollably.



Moscow, Russian Federation

Thirty-three days later, Friday, October 12th

THE BLEAKNESS GNAWED at her bones, conjuring dark memories of a painful childhood. The smoky-silver façade of Sheremetyevo International Airport turned to darker shades of gray as the taxi entered Moscow’s city limits. Decades of pollution had stained block after block of Stalinist-style white marble buildings with a dingy charcoal patina.

“Nothing has changed,” Nadia Constantine whispered to herself in the back of the taxi, “the new Russian Federation is just as depressing as the old Soviet Union.” The gleaming glass and steel skyscrapers of Moscow’s International Business Center, she reflected, and the colorful window displays of the trendy boutiques on Tverskaya Street were a masquerade—bright lipstick and eye glitter on an aging whore.

“What was that?” the taxi driver asked, watching his passenger in the rearview mirror more than the road ahead.

“Pay attention to your driving,” Nadia admonished. She was dressed inappropriately for Moscow—the polished

knee-high boots, tight black leather pants and reddish-brown leather jacket with a fox collar would be fashionably conservative in Rome, but in the streets of Moscow, she stood out like a fashion model or the mistress of a high-ranking party official. Perhaps her new husband, Thomas, was right. She had been out of the game for almost a year. She was rusty. Then again, when she left their apartment in Campo dei Fiori this morning, Moscow was the last place she expected to end up.

The taxi she was following turned off of Tverskaya Street and stopped in front of a two-story building. Just one block off of Moscow's version of Fifth Avenue, broken glass littered the sidewalks and indigents, crouched in the doorways, drank vodka from paper bags. Twenty side-by-side buildings faced each side of the street, a mixture of small businesses and private dwellings. They were almost identical, with smog-stained stone or paint-bare wood fronts. Bars covered the street-level windows. The snowy-haired man in a tan overcoat that she had been following exited his taxi and went through the building's front door without looking around.

"*Stoy!*" Nadia commanded, handing the driver a ten-euro note as he stopped on the street. She had negotiated the fee when she entered the taxi. With the ruble losing nearly forty percent of its value in recent months, the dollar and euro had become the country's unofficial currency. As Nadia walked across the street, she took note that the streetlamps on the corner held no bulbs. Every third or fourth building had trash and garbage piled next to the curb creating a lingering foul odor that Muscovites pretended did not exist.

The building's street-level facade was clad in wine-colored wood that had deteriorated to blotchy patches years

ago. There were no signs on the building. Remnants of Cyrillic gold lettering splattered the front door's top glass panel. It was a neighborhood bar. "*Chyort voz'mi!*" Nadia spat the Russian curse. A woman in her late thirties would never enter an establishment like this unescorted, unless she was working the world's oldest profession. She pulled her blonde hair into a ponytail, secured it with a hair tie from her handbag, and tucked it under a fur hat that matched the collar of her jacket.

As her hand gripped the door's handle, she glanced at her wedding band and hesitated. Tomorrow would mark the eight-week anniversary of her wedding. The last six of those weeks had been spent in extensive physical training, plus a daily regimen of *Krav Maga* martial arts exercises. The results had toned and trimmed her body but left her exhausted by late afternoon. She had not been much of a companion to Thomas—not that he had noticed. A professor at Rome's Pontifical Biblical Institute, he was absorbed in his new lecture series. She often woke in the middle of the night to find him in their living room, lost in thought. They had not, she reflected, talked much lately.

Nadia's right hand began to shake. The tremors passed in a matter of seconds, but the affliction was happening with greater regularity. She had been diagnosed with Huntington's disease last December. Her plan then was to break off what was becoming a deepening relationship, return to Severomorsk, and wait to die. It was then that Thomas had surprised her by petitioning the Pope to be released from his vows of obedience and chastity. This man left the priesthood for her and spent his savings on a larger apartment so he could care for her. That was the moment she realized that she loved him.

Nadia composed herself, blew out a series of short breaths, and opened the bar door. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the gloomy interior. An odor of stale smoke, sweat, and musty beer hung in the air. The man in the tan overcoat was nowhere in sight.

She took two steps and fanned a haze of tobacco smoke away from her face. A reflection of movement in the full-length mirror behind the bar caught her attention. A young man wearing a twill jacket with oversized pockets had slid off a stool behind her. His left hand was reaching for the lock on the top of the front door while his right hand went inside his jacket. At the same time, a heavyset man who Nadia judged to be in his late forties or early fifties, turned away from the bar and started toward her.

Fists clenched, Nadia crouched down, sprung up on her left leg, and spun, initiating an outside crescent swing with her right leg. The heel of her boot, with its metal insert, slammed into the younger man's back with such force that he shattered the door's glass window. Dazed, with blood streaming from his nose and face, the man turned to face his opponent. Nadia followed with a stiff-fingered stab to the nerve meridian in his neck. He crumbled to the floor, unconscious.

Nadia's movements flowed with a catlike grace that belied their lethal potential. As a young woman, Mossad had taught her how to disable an opponent or even kill with brutal efficiency. She brought her hand back to a basic defense position and ducked to her left just as the portly man from the bar reached out for her. His hand caught only air as she again pivoted, leading with her elbow. She felt a solid connection with the man's jaw and heard a distinct crack as his head smacked into a metal bar stool. Blood

trickling from the motionless man's mouth indicated that the fight was over.

The confrontation was over so quickly that the bar's other patrons could only stare, open-mouthed. As a herd, they pushed each other out of the way as they crammed into a back hallway that obviously lead to a rear exit. Behind the bar, the bartender was on the telephone. The police would be arriving shortly.

Nadia squatted over her assailants and placed the back of her hand over their mouths. Thankfully, both were breathing. She rifled through their pockets finding wallets, keys, and a few thousand rubles. They were local thugs, not professionals. As she reached inside the younger man's jacket, her fingers instantly recognized the checkered stock and pinky finger rest of a 9mm Makarov semi-automatic pistol. This was the Soviet Union's military and police sidearm from the 1950s to the early '90s. When the Soviet Union dissolved, hundreds of thousands of these pistols flooded the black market.

I was set up. Why? Nadia pushed the jacketed man's body aside, stepped over the broken glass on the floor, and exited the bar. She tried to hurry but her legs would not cooperate. Her arm shot against the wall to prevent her from falling.

The back surgery she underwent four months ago to remove bullet fragments pressing against her spine had left her with an unusual physical disability. A nerve pathway from her brain to her legs had been severed. She could walk, swing her legs, and carry out high kicks but could not perform repetitive leg movements. Her brain would not permit her to run, swim, dance, bicycle, or even jog.

NADIA COLLECTED HER thoughts, focused on placing

one foot in front of the other, and made her way toward Tverskaya Street where she could disappear among the shoppers. As she turned the corner, she spied what she was looking for. In a used clothing store, she traded her Italian boots, pants, jacket, and hat for a pair of charcoal felt boots, worn jeans, and a wool sweater. For outerwear, she selected a faux-fur coat and a pink-banded knit ski cap.

As she inspected her transformation in a mirror, two Moscow Police cars screamed past and turned down the street toward the bar. Nadia went outside and headed toward the main shopping district, adopting the Muscovite's bored shuffle. The locals never smiled in public. They moved with their heads down, displayed a stern facial expression, and took short steps. Above all else, they avoided eye contact with anyone wearing a uniform.

Mixed in between the designer shops, a Coffee House sign beckoned her off the street. The Starbucks of Moscow, only with table service, Nadia knew these 24-hour cafés offered a limited menu of sandwiches, cold beer, and strong coffee. She settled at a table near a rear entrance, faced the front door, and called her husband on her mobile phone. On the fourth ring, the call went to voicemail. She listened to Thomas's apology for not being available and responded. "Thomas I will not be home tonight. My assignment has taken me out of town but I do need your help with a minor problem. Call me when you get this message. Love you. Ciao."

Nadia ordered a coffee, sweet, and mulled over her situation. She did not want to worry Thomas but her current dilemma was anything but minor. Thinking through all the events that led her to Moscow, it became painfully apparent: She was being tested.



The Stupinsky Potato District, Moscow Oblast, Russia
Friday, October 12th

THE RISING SUN did little to raise the spirits of the farmers already toiling in the drought-stricken rural area. Today would be another twelve-hour stint of backbreaking work, salvaging whatever they could of their dwindling potato, wheat, and barley crops. Always a quiet area where neighbors kept to themselves and did not poke their noses into the business of others, depleted wells and bank accounts caused the small farming community to become even more isolated.

“Where are you going, *Babochka*?” Stenka Vyhovsky asked. He had found the hungry seventeen-year-old on the side of the road six months ago. She was one of the forty to fifty teens who ran away from oppressive farm life every year, hoping to find an easier life in Moscow or Saint Petersburg. Vyhovsky had given her a warm meal, clothes, and introduced her to chasing the dragon—heating heroin on aluminum foil and inhaling the smoke and vapors.

The young woman’s birth name was Alina Kozlov. *Babochka*, Russian for butterfly, was a nickname Vyhovsky

gave her for the fluttering sexual movements she could make with her tongue. Vyhovsky, seventy-two, had a penchant for women under twenty, believing that it kept him virile.

"I do not feel well this morning," Alina said, crawling out of Vyhovsky's bed. I think I am going to be sick." Smoking had escalated to direct injections, and Alina's once youthfully-toned body had deteriorated to skin and bones. She put on a worn robe and staggered downstairs to the seventy-year-old farmhouse's only bathroom.

Vyhovsky slid out of bed, dressed in the same denim work pants and plaid flannel shirt that he wore yesterday and swaggered downstairs to the kitchen.

The three men waiting at the vodka-stained kitchen table were all related. They waited silently while the Cossack took a mouthful of vodka from a bottle on the kitchen counter, swished it around his mouth, and spit it into the sink.

With Vladimir Dubenetsky's suicide inside the Central Moscow Police Station eleven months ago and his son Ilya's still-unexplained death the same month in a hospital in Meyrin, Switzerland, Vyhovsky was now the reigning head of the Dubenetsky arms empire, at least what was left of it. He sat at the table, his craggy face of weather-leathered rough skin resting under an uncombed mane of silver-white hair.

The Russian government had confiscated Dubenetsky's Triumph Palace penthouse, his Ferraris, and an extensive art collection. The family's chain of auto body shops, which laundered money from the arms dealings, was shut down and government investigators had drained bank accounts holding tens of millions of euros. For almost a year, the Dubenetsky name had been absent from the shadowy

international arms market.

"To Vladimir," Vyhovsky said, raising the bottle of vodka with a gnarled hand that testified to decades of fistfights. "He built an empire and lived larger than life." Vyhovsky passed the bottle to the other men at the table.

"To Vladimir," came a unified response as each man took a swig from the bottle.

"What is the news from Moscow?" Vyhovsky asked.

"The government has closed its investigation," said Sergei Budenov, the family's attorney. Recently divorced, Budenov's thin face hosted a particularly pointed nose. His unpleasant looks and nasty demeanor had earned him the nickname of "The Hatchet" in Moscow's legal circles.

"What is our financial situation?" Vyhovsky asked.

"Putin," Dimitry Travkin spat the name, "confiscated our Cayman, Russian, and Vatican accounts but never found our Swiss accounts. I would put our liquidity at three million euros." University educated, with thin lips, brown wavy hair streaked with gray, and focused green eyes, Travkin was the group's accountant and Vyhovsky's brother-in-law. He was the only married member of the circle, with a wife and two children living in one of Moscow's newest imports: a gated community. At fifty-five, he was also the youngest man present. "Have we heard anything from our Iranian associates on the samples we sent?"

"Our Shiite partners in Iran have been clamoring for Katyusha and Grad rockets," Vyhovsky said. "Our gift of three 9K38's had to get their attention. Remember, we have been out of the marketplace for almost a year. Ahmed is probably trying to decide if he can trust us."

"I can have a barge of potatoes ready for shipment in

twenty-four hours," said Viktor Smekhov, the last member of the family's inner circle. Smekhov was built like a bulldog with short legs supporting a muscular frame, a thick neck, and a boxer's flat nose. He was the family's unofficial director of operations and, at fifty-nine, could still bench-press his bodyweight. Smekhov grew up working for a mafia moneylender. A sadist, he was known to skin borrowers alive that failed to meet their payment commitments. He was Budenov's brother-in-law although the two men did not care for each other.

Vyhovsky got up from the table and looked out a kitchen window that had not been cleaned in recent memory. In the distance, a small tractor belched black smoke as it pulled a potato harvester. Workers followed, picking up the potatoes and putting them into buckets. Behind the pickers, a second tractor pulled a rust-covered wagon. The three-hectare (6.6 acre) potato farm had been purchased following the breakup of the Soviet Union when the state's large collective farms were being broken up into small corporate plots and peasant farms. Located 99 kilometers (61 miles) south of Moscow in the Stupinsky Region of Moscow Oblast, the farm was situated on the Oka River, a tributary of the Volga. The property originally consisted of an old farmhouse, a potato processing building, a huge storage building, and a riverside dock where barges could be loaded with potatoes for delivery as far south as the Caspian Sea. Vyhovsky remembered Dubenetsky buying the land and buildings for cash under a fictitious name.

"I was against the purchase of this farm," Vyhovsky reflected, looking at yellowing wallpaper and kitchen cabinets that had lost their finish decades ago. "But I was wrong. Vladimir was brilliant."

"We all thought he was a little crazy," Budenov added. "I questioned his sanity when he bulldozed both buildings and rebuilt them with new foundations, metal walls, and sprinkler systems."

"I remember," Smekhov said, "Vladimir giving the two adjoining neighbors everything his land produced in exchange for planting, cultivating, and harvesting his fields!"

Vyhovsky turned away from the window and took a step toward the group. The plank floor creaked under his weight. "Then we filled that first barge with munitions, covered it with a layer of potatoes, and threw a net over everything. Nobody paid any attention as it floated down the Oka to the Volga River, into the Caspian Sea, and docked in Iran at Bandar Anzali. We were just one of a dozen potato barges going to a foreign port!"

"And to the outside world, we are still just a potato farm," Smekhov added with a laugh.

Vyhovsky put four shot glasses on the table and filled them with vodka. "We have waited long enough. Our warehouses are filled to the ceiling. I declare that the Dubenetsky family is open for business."

"To Vladimir!" all four men said, raising their glasses.

Budenov pushed back from the table and stood. "Dimitry and I must return to Moscow. Call either of us if you hear from Ahmed."

Vyhovsky poured himself another shot of vodka and lifted it in toast to his departing comrades. When they had left, he turned to Smekhov. "Babochka has become a liability. The stupid bitch does not even know that she is pregnant. You can have her."

Smekhov's eyes glistened. A drop of spittle hung on his

lower lip. He wiped it with the back of his hand as he sprung from the table. From one of the top kitchen cupboards, Smekhov began filling a bag with white candles.

“What are those for?” Vyhovsky asked.

Smekhov glared at the old Cossack. “You would not understand. Everything must be done in a certain way. There is much to prepare for. I will be in the warehouse.”

