

Лия Криз

The Amber Heart



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Polina is an amber expert from St Petersburg. She trusts stones, not people, because stones don't lie. She is invited to the seaside town of Zelenomorsk to value the famous collection of the late Arkady Stern. Its greatest treasure is the Amber Heart, a brooch with a mosquito frozen inside it forty million years ago. On her very first day, Polina realises the brooch is a fake. That night a light flickers in the greenhouse, and in the morning the housekeeper is found dead at the foot of the cliff stairs. In a house where the heirs hate each other, everyone is hiding something. The case falls to investigator Gleb Vetrov, wry and stubborn. He asks Polina for help, but soon the evidence starts pointing at her. A gripping story of love, deception and the truth that always leaves a trace.

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Лия Криз The Amber Heart

The Amber Heart

A novel in eight chapters

Oct 10, 2026 · @Влад

Chapter 1. The Villa on the Cliff

Polina's grandfather used to say that stones never lie. The people who sell them do.

Lev Aronovich Lebedev worked as a jeweller on the Petrograd Side for forty years. He could pick up a ring, look at it through a loupe for half a minute and tell you where the stone had been cut, how old it was and how many times it had changed hands. Little Polina would sit in his workshop on a tall stool and watch emeralds, garnets and amber come alive under his fingers.

"A stone remembers everything, Polinka," her grandfather would say. "Every little crack, every bubble. You just have to know how to ask."

He had been gone for nine years now. And at thirty-one, Polina Lebedeva had become the leading amber expert at Northern Gallery, a St Petersburg auction house. She knew how to ask stones. People were harder.

The taxi broke down two kilometres short of its destination.

Or rather, it didn't break down. The driver, a moustached man in a cap, stopped in the middle of the road that ran along the cliff and stared gloomily at an enormous pine lying across the asphalt.

"That's it, miss," he said. "End of the line. There was a storm yesterday, that's what knocked it down. You'll have to walk from here. It's not far, along the promenade by the sea, twenty minutes."

"With a suitcase?"

"What else can you do." He shrugged. "There's a detour through the forest, but after the rain the mud's knee-deep. I'm not going in there, think of my suspension."

Polina got out. The wind hit her in the face so hard it took her breath away. Cold, salty, late October on the Baltic. Below the cliff the grey sea roared. Waves rolled onto the sand, broke into white foam and crawled back. Gulls wheeled screaming over the water.

Zelenomorsk. A small resort town on the coast, an hour from Kaliningrad. In summer it was probably lovely: pines, sandy beaches, old German villas with tiled roofs. Now the town looked deserted. The cafés on the promenade were shut, the benches empty, only the streetlamps swaying in the wind.

Polina sighed, turned up the collar of her coat and wheeled her suitcase along the wet paving.

The suitcase was heavy. It held not just her clothes but all her equipment: an ultraviolet lamp, a microscope, a refractometer, a set of loupes, scales, reagents. The wheels clattered over the tiles and caught in the cracks, and every hundred metres Polina had to stop and catch her breath.

She was also wearing heeled boots. Beautiful suede ones, completely unsuited to a walk along a wet coastline. In St Petersburg that morning it had seemed a good idea.

At the next bend a heel caught between two paving stones and Polina nearly fell. The suitcase tore out of her hand and rolled towards the edge of the promenade, towards the low stone parapet beyond which the cliff began.

"No-no-no!"

She lunged after it but was too late. The suitcase hit the parapet, bounced, tipped...

And someone's hand caught the handle.

"Careful," said a man's voice. "The sea's in a bad mood today. Whatever falls in, it won't give back."

Polina looked up.

In front of her stood a man of about thirty-seven. Tall, in a dark jacket with the collar up, worn jeans and heavy boots. Short dark hair tousled by the wind, a touch of grey at the temples. Unshaven. A lean face with sharp cheekbones, and eyes of pale grey, almost transparent, like Baltic water on an overcast day. Amused.

Beside him sat a dog. An old yellow Labrador with a grey muzzle, regarding Polina with polite interest.

"Thank you," said Polina, taking the suitcase. "There's expensive equipment in there."

"I gathered. It weighs as much as a small safe." The man looked her over, lingered on her boots and smiled faintly. "Where are you going dressed like that? A catwalk?"

"Villa Chaika," Polina replied coldly. The Seagull.

The smile vanished. He looked at her more closely.

"The Sterns' place?"

"Yes. Why?"

"No reason." He paused. "Not the jolliest place for a guest. Especially now."

"I'm not a guest. I'm here for work."

"All the more so."

He took the suitcase from her. Simply took it without asking and set off along the promenade. The Labrador trotted after him, looking back at Polina as if inviting her to follow.

"Hey!" Polina caught up, stumbling on her heels. "I can manage!"

"You can't," the man said calmly. "One more stumble like that and I'll be fishing you off the beach. And it's my day off. Shturman, heel."

The dog obediently pressed against his leg.

"Shturman?" Polina asked. "Navigator?"

"He used to live on a yacht. With his owner. The owner moved away, sold the yacht and left the dog behind." The man shrugged. "So he lives with me now. On dry land. Misses the sea."

They walked along the cliff. The wind tore at the hem of her coat, spray flew into their faces. Polina glanced sideways at her unexpected companion. He walked easily, as if the suitcase weighed nothing, and looked at the sea.

"Are you local?" she asked.

"Everyone here's local. Except you." He glanced at her. "You're from Petersburg. Going by your accent and the way you look at the sea. Like something that needs to be valued."

Polina flushed.

"And you, going by your manners, are from the woods."

The man unexpectedly laughed. His laugh was short and a little husky, but genuine.

"Close enough. Gleb."

"Polina."

He nodded, as if the name suited her.

Villa Chaika stood at the very edge of the cliff, as if it were about to leap into the sea.

It was an old German mansion from the early twentieth century. Three storeys of dark brick, a steep tiled roof, a round turret with a weathervane shaped like a gull. Tall windows with small panes. An avenue of old lindens led up to the house, completely bare at this autumn hour. To the left of the house, behind the bushes, gleamed the glass roof of a greenhouse. And to the right, from the very edge of the cliff, a long wooden staircase ran down to the beach. Hundreds of steps, handrails, landings to rest on.

Yellow light burned in the ground-floor windows.

Gleb stopped at the wrought-iron gates and set down the suitcase.

"You're on your own from here. I don't go in there."

"Why not?"

He hesitated.

"Let's just say they're not very fond of me there."

"Why?"

"Because I ask questions," said Gleb. He smiled, but his eyes stayed serious. "Good luck, Polina. And don't use that staircase at night. It's old and slippery. Twenty steps rotted through last year and were never replaced."

He whistled to the dog and walked back towards the promenade. Polina watched him until his dark figure melted into the dusk.

Then she turned and pressed the bell.

The door was opened by a woman of about sixty. Short, spare, with smooth grey hair combed back and thin pursed lips. In a severe navy dress with a white collar. She took in Polina with a quick, sharp glance, from her wet boots to her windblown hair.

"You're from Petersburg? The valuer?"

"The expert," Polina corrected. "Polina Lebedeva. I'm expected."

"You are," said the woman without expression. "I'm Galina Stepanovna, the housekeeper. Come in. Rostislav Olegovich is in the study."

Inside, the house was even gloomier than outside. High moulded ceilings, dark oak panelling, heavy velvet curtains. A wide staircase with carved banisters led upstairs. It smelled of wax, old paper and, for some reason, lilies. Paintings in gilt frames hung on the walls: seascapes, ships in storms, sombre portraits.

And everywhere there was amber.

Amber vases on the mantelpiece. Amber candlesticks on side tables. In the corner of the hall, in a tall glass case, stood a real amber sailing ship, some seventy centimetres high, with tiny sails made of the thinnest plates. The lamplight passed through it, and the ship glowed from within in honeyed gold.

Polina stopped despite herself.

"Nineteenth century," she said quietly. "A Königsberg workshop. Good God, what craftsmanship."

Galina Stepanovna looked at her with mild surprise. For the first time, perhaps, with a little respect.

"Arkady Germanovich used to say the same thing," she said. "Word for word."

Rostislav Olegovich Zaretsky turned out to be exactly what Polina had imagined a wealthy collector's family lawyer would be. About fifty-five. Tall, trim, with distinguished silver hair and a neat little beard. An impeccable charcoal suit, a silk tie, amber cufflinks. A soft velvety voice, a warm handshake, attentive brown eyes behind thin gold-rimmed glasses.

"Polina Lvovna, at last!" He rose from behind a vast desk. "We were beginning to worry. They say the road's blocked?"

"A pine came down. I walked."

"Walked! With all your equipment!" He shook his head with genuine sympathy. "Galina Stepanovna, tea, please. And have the blue room made up for Polina Lvovna."

The housekeeper left without a word.

"Please, sit down." Zaretsky gestured to a leather armchair by the fire. "You probably know the situation in outline. Arkady Germanovich Stern died three weeks ago. His heart. He was seventy-eight. He collected amber for fifty years. It's the largest private collection in the country. More than four hundred pieces."

"I know. I've seen the catalogue."

"According to his wishes, the will is to be read only after an independent expert has completed a full valuation of the collection. He insisted on it. He said he didn't want his heirs fighting without knowing exactly what they were dividing." Zaretsky smiled sadly. "Though I'm afraid they'll fight anyway. The reading is set for six days from now. Do you have time?"

"If I work from morning till night, I'll manage."

"Excellent." He paused. "You know the centrepiece of the collection, of course."

"The Amber Heart," said Polina.

She knew. Everyone who worked with amber knew. A heart-shaped brooch, about six centimetres high. Baltic amber of the rarest transparent cherry-red hue, set in gold with tiny diamonds. The work of a St Petersburg jeweller in the 1890s. But the brooch's value lay neither in the gold nor in the diamonds. Inside the amber, at the very centre of the heart, a mosquito had been frozen forever. Tiny, perfectly preserved, wings outspread, as if it had been flying forty million years ago and stopped in mid-flight.

Legend had it that the brooch belonged to one of the Empress's ladies-in-waiting. By the estimates of auction houses, it was worth more than the rest of the collection put together.

"You'll see it tomorrow," said Zaretsky. "It's in the safe in the gallery. Arkady Germanovich hadn't shown it to anyone these last few years. Not even his children."

Dinner was served at eight. A long table in the dining room, a white tablecloth, silver, crystal. Candles in amber holders. And five people who clearly did not want to sit at the same table.

Zaretsky introduced them one by one.

Viktor Arkadyevich Stern, the elder son. Forty-five, heavy, red-faced, with a loud voice and an expensive watch on a hairy wrist. Owner of a chain of restaurants in Kaliningrad. He shook Polina's hand too hard and immediately forgot about her, returning to his glass of cognac.

Marina Arkadyevna, the daughter. Forty, though she looked younger. Thin, nervy, with huge lined eyes and a mane of red hair. An actress at the regional drama theatre. She smoked long thin cigarettes right at the table, and nobody dared object.

"A valuer," Marina drawled, studying Polina through the smoke. "How romantic. Going to work out what Daddy's inheritance is worth? Don't bother. It'll all go to her anyway."

She nodded towards the end of the table.

A young woman sat there. Twenty-nine at most. Fair hair gathered in a simple knot. A pale face without make-up, delicate features, large grey eyes. A black dress, too plain for this dining room. She sat very upright and looked at her plate.

"Yelizaveta Andreyevna," Zaretsky said gently. "Arkady Germanovich's widow."

"Liza," the young woman corrected quietly, and raised her eyes to Polina. "Just Liza. Welcome."

"Widow," Viktor repeated loudly, and snorted. "Nurse, more like. She was his nurse. Looked after Father after his heart attack. And six months later, bang, she's his wife. Neat, eh?"

"Vitya," Zaretsky said warningly.

"What, Vitya? Everyone knows! Fifty years between them! You think she loved him? An old man with a bad heart? She loved his amber!"

Liza went even paler but said nothing. Only her fingers, gripping her napkin, turned white.

"Uncle Vitya, that's enough," said the last person at the table.

It was a young man of about thirty-two. Thin, dishevelled, in a crumpled sweater and glasses. He sat beside Liza and looked as if he wanted the floor to swallow him.

"Denis," Zaretsky introduced him. "Arkady Germanovich's nephew. A photographer. He photographed the collection for the catalogue."

"Nice to meet you," Denis muttered without looking up.

Dinner passed in a heavy silence, broken only by Marina's barbs and Viktor's loud breathing. Galina Stepanovna served the courses and cleared the plates without a sound, her face as impenetrable as a statue's. Polina ate, barely tasting anything, and thought that there were too many people in this house who hated each other. And too much money for that hatred to stay harmless.

The blue room was on the first floor, at the end of a long corridor. A tall four-poster bed, an antique dressing table, a window overlooking the sea. Somewhere below, the waves were roaring.

Polina was unpacking when there was a quiet knock at the door.

Galina Stepanovna stood on the threshold with a tray. A cup of tea, a little dish of biscuits.

"You hardly ate at dinner," she said. "Arkady Germanovich always had tea brought to guests at night."

"Thank you."

The housekeeper set the tray on the table. But she didn't leave. She stood looking at the equipment laid out on the bed: lamps, loupes, the microscope.

"Can you really tell real amber from fake?" she asked suddenly.

"That's my job."

Galina Stepanovna was silent. Then she went to the door, looked out into the corridor, listened. Closed the door again.

"Polina Lvovna," she said very quietly. Her voice was strained, as if every word cost her effort. "I've been in this house thirty-two years. I knew Arkady Germanovich better than his own children did. And I'll tell you one thing. You'll be looking at the stones. That's good. But don't look only at the stones."

"What do you mean?"

The housekeeper shook her head.

"Not everything in this house is what it seems. And not everything that glitters is amber."

She left quickly, before Polina could ask a single question. The door closed without a sound.

Polina stood in the middle of the room for a long time. Then she went to the window.

The night was dark and moonless. Below, at the foot of the cliff, the line of surf showed white. And along the beach, right by the water's edge, a man was slowly walking with a torch. A dog ran beside him.

For some reason Polina was sure it was Gleb.

And for some reason it made her feel a little calmer.

Chapter 2. The Mosquito That Never Was

The gallery took up the entire east wing of the second floor.

It was a long narrow room with tall windows facing the sea. Along the walls stood glass display cases on carved oak legs, and in each one lay amber. Hundreds of pieces. Necklaces and bracelets, caskets and snuffboxes, figurines of animals and birds, chess sets, icons in amber frames, pipes, seals. And plain stones: unworked, shapeless, but so beautiful you couldn't take your eyes off them. Honey, lemon, milky white, nearly black. In some of them insects, leaves, air bubbles, drops of ancient water had been frozen.

The morning sun, rare in late October, beat against the windows, and the whole gallery glowed from within with warm golden light. As if Polina had stepped inside an enormous piece of amber.

She stopped on the threshold and forgot to breathe.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" someone said quietly behind her.

Polina turned. Liza stood in the doorway, in the same plain black dress, holding a tray with two steaming cups of coffee.

"I thought you'd want coffee. Galina Stepanovna usually brings it, but today she's been... I don't know. Not herself since this morning."

"Thank you."

Liza put the tray on the windowsill. She went over to one of the cases and gazed for a long time at a little amber frog, carved so skilfully that it seemed about to jump.

"Arkady taught me to tell them apart," she said. "At first they just looked like yellow pebbles to me. But he'd tell me about each one. Where it was found, who carved it, what its story was. He could talk for hours." She smiled faintly. "His children think I married him for money. But I married him because he was the first person who ever talked to me. Really talked. Do you understand?"

Polina didn't know what to say. She looked at this pale girl with tired eyes and tried to work out whether she was telling the truth. Stones were easier. A stone can't pretend.

"I understand," she said at last.

Liza nodded and left, leaving behind a faint scent of lavender.

Polina worked all day.

She began at the far end of the gallery, methodically, case by case. Every piece into her hands, onto the scales, under the loupe. Colour, transparency, inclusions. The ultraviolet lamp: real Baltic amber glows bluish under it, sometimes greenish, while fakes — plastic, glass, artificial resins — behave differently. Then the microscope. Then notes in a thick notebook, in the neat hand her grandfather had taught her as a child.

By three in the afternoon she had described a hundred and twelve pieces. All genuine. Arkady Stern knew his amber.

At four Zaretsky came.

"Well, Polina Lvovna? Ready for the main event?"

He went to the wall at the very end of the gallery and moved aside a small painting, a seascape with a lighthouse. Behind it was a safe door. Zaretsky entered the code, shielding the keypad with his palm, and turned the handle.

Inside, on black velvet, in a small mahogany case, lay the Amber Heart.

Polina had seen it in photographs hundreds of times. But the photographs lied. In real life the brooch was far more beautiful. The cherry-red amber glowed so deeply and brightly it was as if a tiny fire burned inside. The gold setting, delicate and lacy, studded with small diamonds, embraced the stone the way palms cup a candle flame. And at the very centre, at the heart of the heart, hung the mosquito. Thin legs, transparent wings, a curved body.

"My God," Polina whispered.

"Yes," said Zaretsky proudly, as if the brooch were his. "Shall I leave you alone with it?"

"If I may."

"Of course. I'll be in the study. Call me when you're done."

He left. Polina put on white cotton gloves, carefully lifted the case and carried it to the table by the window where she had laid out her equipment.

First she simply looked. Long and carefully. That was what her grandfather taught her: before you ask a stone anything, you must get acquainted with it.

The setting was genuine. She saw that at once. St Petersburg gold of the old 56 standard, the maker's mark barely visible under the loupe — initials and a tiny double-headed eagle. Old rose-cut diamonds, cut the way they were more than a century ago. Tiny worn spots on the gold where the brooch had rubbed against the fabric of a dress. Everything was right.

Then she switched on the ultraviolet lamp.

And something inside her quietly clenched.

The amber glowed. But not the right way. Not with that soft bluish, milky radiance she had seen in a hundred and twelve pieces in a row today. This glow was flatter, denser, with a barely perceptible chalky tint. If she hadn't spent the whole day with genuine Baltic amber, she probably wouldn't have noticed. The difference was tiny. But it was there.

"No," Polina said aloud. "No, it can't be."

She turned off the lamp. Put the brooch under the microscope. Adjusted the focus.

The bubbles. In real amber, air bubbles are irregular in shape, elongated, flattened, like frozen drops. These were too round. Too neat. The way they are in resin that has been heated and pressed.

And the mosquito.

Polina looked at it for a long time. At its wings, its body, its thin curved legs. And suddenly she saw something that turned her fingers cold.

The mosquito's legs had white stripes. Thin, sharp, like rings.

She knew this mosquito. Anyone who worked with amber inclusions knew it. The Asian tiger mosquito. Black, with white stripes on its legs and back. A species that came to Europe from Southeast Asia only a few decades ago. You could meet it in summer in Sochi or in Italy.

But it could never have been in Baltic amber. Baltic amber is forty million years old. And this mosquito had most likely been buzzing over someone's veranda some fifteen years ago.

Polina leaned back in her chair. Her heart was pounding so loudly she thought the whole gallery could hear it.

It was a fake. A superb, masterful, very expensive fake. Someone had taken the genuine antique setting, removed the real stone and put an expert copy in its place: young resin, pressed and dyed cherry red, with a modern mosquito inside. Done so subtly that it could fool almost anyone.

Almost.

But that person hadn't known about the stripes on a mosquito's legs.

Zaretsky listened to her in silence.

He sat at his enormous desk with his fingers laced together, and his face was motionless. Only when Polina got to the mosquito did he slowly take off his glasses and rub the bridge of his nose.

"Are you sure?" he asked at last. His voice had grown duller.

"Absolutely. I can show you under the microscope. And the ultraviolet. And the bubbles. That's not Baltic amber, Rostislav Olegovich. It's a copy. The original has been switched."

"When?"

"I don't know. Maybe a year ago. Maybe ten. You can't tell from the fake itself." She paused. "Could Arkady Germanovich have known?"

Zaretsky shook his head.

"If he had known, he'd have turned the whole house upside down. That brooch was like... a child to him." He put his glasses back on. He gave Polina a long, attentive look. "Who else knows about this?"

"No one. Only you."

"Good." He nodded. "Very good. Polina Lvovna, I beg you: not a word to anyone. Not the heirs, not the staff, no one. You saw what goes on at the table. If it comes out now that the collection's greatest treasure has been stolen, they'll tear each other's throats out. Accusations, scandals, police... And there are only five days until the will is read. Let's wait until then. Meanwhile I'll contact the security service, my people in Kaliningrad. Quietly, carefully. Agreed?"

Polina hesitated. She didn't like it. Switching an object like that was a crime, and crimes should be reported. But Zaretsky was the family's lawyer, he had officially hired her, and the last word was his.

"Agreed," she said reluctantly. "But I'll carry on valuing the rest of the collection. If this isn't the only substitution, I need to know."

"Of course." Zaretsky gave his soft smile. "You're a remarkable specialist, Polina Lvovna. Arkady Germanovich would have been so happy that it was you who took on his collection."

As Polina left the study, a navy dress flickered at the end of the corridor. Galina Stepanovna. The housekeeper quickly turned the corner onto the stairs, and her footsteps faded below.

Polina stopped. Had she been standing at the door? Had she heard?

She didn't know. But all evening, at dinner, she felt the housekeeper's intent gaze on her. A gaze in which there was something like fear.

At night Polina couldn't sleep.

She lay under the heavy canopy and stared into the dark. Outside the sea roared, the wind droned in the chimneys, a shutter creaked somewhere. The old house lived its night life: sighing, crackling, whispering.

The same thoughts kept circling in her head. A fake. A tiger mosquito. A genuine setting that someone had held in their hands, prised open with tiny tweezers, removed the stone. Who? Someone with access to the safe. Someone who knew the code. Someone who knew exactly whom to commission for such a delicate copy.

Shortly after midnight she gave up. She got up, pulled on a cardigan and went to the window.

The night was clear and cold. The moon, nearly full, hung over the sea, and a silver path stretched across the water from it. The garden below looked cut from black paper: bare lindens, bushes, paths.

And the greenhouse.

There was a light in the greenhouse.

Not electric. The weak, jumping glow of a torch. It moved behind the glass, slowly, from one end to the other. Stopped. Moved again. As if someone were searching for something among the plants. Or cutting something.

Polina froze at the window, her forehead pressed to the cold glass.

The light went out.

A minute later the greenhouse door opened and a dark figure came out. In a long cloak or coat, with a hood. Impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman. The figure stood, looking around. Then walked quickly along the path. Not towards the house. Towards the cliff, where the long wooden staircase to the sea began.

And disappeared behind the bushes.

Polina stood at the window a long time. Her heart was pounding. She thought about going down. Waking someone. But whom? Zaretsky? Viktor, who'd been drinking cognac all evening? She remembered Gleb's words: "Don't use that staircase at night." And she stayed.

Around one o'clock she thought she heard, through the howl of the wind, a short cry from outside. Or maybe it was a gull. Or the wind.

She didn't know.

She got back into bed and lay with her eyes open for a long time, listening to the sea. She fell asleep only towards morning, when the sky outside turned grey.

She was woken by a scream.

A real, human scream, hoarse, full of horror. It came from outside, from the direction of the cliff.

Polina jumped up and rushed to the window. Below, an old man in a quilted jacket and rubber boots was running up the garden path towards the house. The gardener, Timofei; she had glimpsed him yesterday. He was waving his arms and shouting something she couldn't make out.

Polina threw her coat on over her pyjamas and ran downstairs.

People were already gathering in the hall. A sleepy Denis in a sweater pulled on inside out. Marina in a silk robe, pale, without her usual make-up. Liza, wrapped in a shawl. Zaretsky, fully dressed, as if he had never gone to bed. Last, stomping heavily, came Viktor.

Timofei stumbled through the door, gasping. His face was white as chalk.

"There..." He waved towards the sea. "On the stairs... Galina... Galina Stepanovna..."

"What?" Zaretsky said sharply. "What's happened to her?"

The old man looked at him. And Polina understood before he said it.

"Dead," Timofei breathed. "Fell. Where the steps are rotten. Down... onto the rocks..."

Liza gave a small cry and covered her face with her hands. Marina sank onto a stair as if her legs had given way. Viktor swore foully.

And Polina stood in the middle of the hall thinking about the jumping light in the greenhouse. About the dark figure walking towards the cliff. And about the short cry she had taken for a gull.

The police arrived forty minutes later.

Two cars with flashing lights stopped at the wrought-iron gates. Out of the first came two young officers in uniform and a female forensic examiner with a case. From the second, unhurriedly, climbed a tall man in a dark jacket.

Polina stood on the porch, still in her coat over her pyjamas, and watched him walk up the linden avenue. Unhurried, hands in his pockets. The wind ruffled his dark hair with its grey at the temples.

He climbed the steps. Stopped. Looked at her with his pale grey eyes.

"Good morning, Polina," he said. "Though I doubt it's good."

"You..." She was flustered. "You're the police?"

"Investigator Vetrov. Gleb Andreyevich. Investigative Department, Zelenomorsk District." He smiled faintly. "I told you: they don't like me here because I ask questions."

He paused, looking somewhere past her, towards the cliff, where gulls were already circling over the staircase.

"I told you not to use that staircase at night," he said quietly. "Pity I didn't tell her."

Chapter 3. Investigator Vetrov

The staircase to the sea began at the very edge of the cliff, beyond a low stone wall. A hundred and eighty-six wooden steps, eight landings, handrails darkened by rain. At the bottom, a narrow strip of beach and boulders where the waves broke.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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