

Russian women's detective

#black_series

Women's detective series. Eksmo. Moscow 2018. approx. 350 pages each

The main character is the Moscow investigative journalist Inga Belova. Due to a scandal, she and her photographer colleague Oleg were dismissed from the glossy magazine QQ. Inga has since tried her luck as a freelance investigative video blogger. She encounters strange incidents, mostly in her immediate private environment, in which the police see no reason to investigate. Thus Inga herself begins with investigations. Among her supporters are her photographer colleague and friend Oleg, forensic scientist Kholodikver, detective Kirill Arkharov and a mysterious IT guy who hides behind the pseudonym Indiwind and makes special requests for Inga for a small fee: researching addresses, telephone numbers and personal data, cracking passwords, checking the accuracy of information, etc.

Inga herself has the rare gift of seeing spoken words as colours and thus their emotional colouring (similar to synaesthesia). As helpful as this is in her research, as disturbing is it in her private life. Since she cannot turn it off, she also analyses telephone calls with her mother or daughter in clairvoyant commentaries, which also makes subplots in the novel entertaining and funny.

With the young Inga Belova, the female author collective succeeds in creating a modern, authentic main heroine: thoroughly honest and soberly analytical, cheeky, thoughtful and reliable, willing to take risks to the brink of illegality, insistent to the point of stubbornness. As the single mother of a pubescent daughter, we also experience her from her vulnerable, self-doubting side. As a divorced single woman, she attracts the attention of men not only because of her research: ex-husband, best friend and colleague, old classmate, detective and others. Or is it Inga who gives herself a certain hope? The consistent further development of the main heroine Inga not only succeeds very convincingly as a single mother, but also as a „left alone“ woman.

In terms of content, the authors of the collective always focus on very up-to-date topics: international art trade in connection with robbery and counterfeiting, demolition of entire residential quarters in Moscow in connection with land speculation, influence of social networks on the psyche (discussion about depression), etc. Each time they prove their ability to compose the theme into an intelligently entangled plot with several unexpected twists and turns and, moreover, to very cleverly lay the wrong tracks. The main plot in all cases takes place in today's Moscow. Its streets, squares, quarters and backyards, described in detail, provide the concretely recognizable crime scenes for the series.

Each volume has a completed plot and can be read separately. There is an additional hidden plot though running through the series and exposed in volume 4 only.



* Maria Dolon is the pen name of a female collective of authors:
Nelli Abdullina, Natalya Zvezdkina, Tatyana Lebedeva, Natalya Poroshina, Elena Rykova

Maria Dolon*

Russian women's detective

#black_shelf

Vol. 1. Moscow 2018. 345 pages

english sample available

Inga Belova has just been dismissed from the glossy magazine QQ because of a scandal and has to accept another blow: TV anchorman Volokhov, her old friend and teacher, has died. Heart attack is the official version. Inga is in a desolate state. When she learns from Volochov's widow that an expensive book – the libretto „Parade“ by Jean Cocteau with the author's autograph and original drawings by Pablo Picasso – has disappeared from the apartment, she no longer believes in a heart attack. A forensic scientist friend of hers confirms that he was murdered, because tiny traces of an injection were found on the back of Volokhov's head. Since the police remain inactive, Inga pushes the investigation of the death of Volochov herself. She learns of his close relationship to a young poet. But shortly before he can provide her with information, he is run over in front of Inga's eyes. The license plate leads Inga to the Bolshoi Theatre and to one of the set designers. He confesses to the hit-and-run, but dies himself trying to escape from Moscow. It was murder again – someone hacked into the on-board computer of the getaway car and manipulated it. The perpetrator obviously unscrupulously tries to eliminate witnesses. Soon Inga finds the link between Bolshoi Theatre, poet and Volochov. It is the famous German collector Otto von Meier. On his behalf, the poet stole the libretto „Parade“ (Volochov decidedly refused to sell), and the set designer stole original drawings and decorations by famous artists from the Bolshoi Theatre and replaced them with copies. Meier operates in Russia through a member of the Cultural Committee, who not only helps with art theft, but also organizes an exhibition in honour of Meier's father – a man who had saved 150 Jewish families at great risk in the 1930s. But the exhibition, which is supposed to be Otto's triumph, becomes his funeral. The young American Michael, who has been working with Inga in the background for quite some time, appears at the funeral. He comes from a German-Jewish family that once turned to Meier senior to help them escape from Nazi Germany. In return, the family had bequeathed all their art treasures to Meier. But Meier wrote a denunciation to the SS, just as he had done hundreds of other times and thus came into possession of a huge art collection. The first 150 families actually rescued had served him only as bait. This is told in flash-backs to Germany in the 1930s and to the USA in the 2000s. After Michael has made everything public, the collection is confiscated immediately. Meier's henchman from the Culture Committee can set off for London.

In the end, however, it turns out that this story has nothing to do with the murder of Volochov. Volochov was murdered by an elderly journalist who was terminally ill and who had decided to take a whole series of former world stars to the afterlife before his own death. Not without first leading interviews with them to his own fame, in which he even recorded their deaths on video. In the end, he also places his own video confession on the Internet.

A multi-layered, fascinatingly dense thriller with a series of unexpected twists. Step by step, the loose threads of several crimes are linked together to surprise the reader once again at the end: two overlapping but independent circles of perpetrators and motifs whose associated crimes happen to benefit each other. The subject of art auction trading in conjunction with the robbery and restitution of Jewish art collections gives the novel a factually well-researched international framework.

Maria Dolon*

Russian women's detective

#black_shelf

Scenes of action: Moscow, Leipzig, London, Amsterdam

BACKGROUND

Art crime will always remain a pressing issue. INTERPOL registers art theft worth of 4 to 6 million dollars each year. The recent jewelry heist in Dresden's Green Vault will make these figures even worse. However, some long-lost masterpieces miraculously reappear, like the "Portrait of a Lady", a painting by Gustav Klimt that was stolen and hidden in the wall of a Piacenza art gallery. Artworks in Europe went through most dramatic developments during World War II. Many of them are to be traced. Therefore the Thuringian State Office for Monument Preservation and Archaeology commenced excavations in the quarry of the Buchenwald concentration camp. After the camp's liberation by the US forces in 1945, two tunnels were opened, those were dug by prisoners at the SS order and served as secret depots for valuables stolen by Nazis. Recently disclosed evidence proves that there may be more depots to be found during excavation. Looted art is often rediscovered in private collections, such as a trove of artworks worth more than 1 billion dollars found in a Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, son of the famous Nazi art-dealer. This incredible case is central to the detective novel "#black_shelf" by Maria Dolon. Inga Belova, a Moscow journalist, investigates the theft of a book containing Picasso's original sketches and the murder of its owner, a famous TV host, and discovers a criminal network on the Russian art-market leading to the legendary Nazi collection.

SUMMARY

The main character is the journalist Inga Belova, divorced, raising a teenage daughter. Inga has the gift of synesthesia. With a scandal she is fired from the fashion magazine QQ. At the same time, an elderly TV presenter Volokhov, her friend and teacher, dies. The official version is heart attack. But from his widow, the heroine learns that an precious book has disappeared from the apartment - the libretto „Parade“ by Jean Cocteau with the author's autograph and drawings by Pablo Picasso.

The medical examiner informs her that on the back of Volokhov's neck a barely noticeable trace from an injection was found, so this is a murder. Since the police are inactive, Inga takes the investigation into their own hands, armed with the support of a group of people. Her team: forensic expert Yevgeniya Kholodivker, investigator Kirill Arkharov, friend-photographer Oleg Shtein, who was fired together with Inga from the magazine, Edik, a childhood friend in love with her, as well as Inga's virtual acquaintance - a computer genius named Indiwind.

Inga is making progress in the investigation of Volokhov's death. She learns about his close relations with a young poet, but does not have time to meet with him - before her eyes the poet dies in an accident. Traces lead Inga to the Bolshoi Theatre: to the restorer Zhuzhlev, who admits to having run over the poet, but for some reason is released on a subscription basis. The restorer is trying to escape from Moscow, but dies in an accident along the way. And this is murder again. Hacking the on-board computer of the car, the killer turned it into an uncontrollable piece of iron and sent the restorer to certain death.

Soon Inga finds a connection between the restorer Zhuzhlev, the poet and Volokhov. They are united by the famous German collector Otto von Mayer, by order of whom the poet stole the book „Parade“ from Volokhov. And for Mayer, Zhuzhlev stole from the Bolshoi Theatre the originals of drawings and sceneries created by great artists, replacing them with his own copies.

Mayer operates in Russia through a senior official Petryaev, who not only helps to get works of art, but also organizes an exhibition in honor of Mayer's father, the man who allegedly saved 150 Jewish families at the risk of the Holocaust during the 1930s. However, the exhibition, which was supposed to be Otto's triumph, turns into his shame. Michael, a descendant of a Jewish family who died in concentration camps by the fault of Mayer's father, appears at the exhibition and exposes Mayer's crimes. The collection of Otto von Mayer is arrested, Petryaev escapes to London. But the escape is temporary - the reader will meet this character in the book # in_black_body.

But Mayer has nothing to do with the murder of Volokhov. Inga finds out that he was killed by the terminally ill journalist Ageev, who decided to send a whole galaxy of elderly stars to the next world. He came to them under the pretext of an interview and even recorded their death on video. In the final, having made a fatal injection to himself, he records his confession and uploads a video with all the victims on the Internet. The last victim of Ageev was a former movie star, a distant relative of Michael and girlfriend of Inga, in the house of whom they met. But the romance of Inga and Michael which has barely begun, broke off due to the tragic death of the actress.

There is one allegedly brutal murder in the book, marked with a dice as the number "5" (the victim is Inga's journal colleague Larisa Feoktistova), but the real killer maniac (from Inga's inner circle) will be exposed only in the 4th book of series # under the black mask.

Maria Dolon*

Russian women's detective

#black_dolphins

Vol. 2. Moscow 2018. 318 pages

Inga Belova is currently researching fraud in connection with the renovation of historical monuments in Moscow. Under the guise of monument protection, valuable buildings are actually being destroyed – because of the valuable properties in the heart of Moscow. Together with her best friend, the photographer Oleg Stein, Inga collects evidence. But then something terrible happens. Because Oleg doesn't answer her calls Inga one morning goes to Stein with the housekeeper they share, and they find him hanged in his photo studio.

The shocked Inga refuses to believe that the cheerful and fun-loving Oleg has killed himself. But evidence seems clear. There is a suicide note written by him. One of his friends claims that Oleg had had a severe depression for several years. When she logs into his profile from his computer, Inga discovers the „Black Dolphins“, a secret group in which Oleg was not only an ordinary member, but also one of the moderators. The group's member list is updated regularly, posts sometimes appear on the pinboard stating that the next person has „awakened“ (i.e. committed suicide). But without a name. Whoever joins the group gets a number and a new name – in honor of a celebrity who committed suicide. Oleg, for example, was Robin Williams (matching the way of his suicide – strangulation). Inga enters the group with a fake account and starts chatting with the moderator Charon under her avatar name Dalida. But in real Moscow, she rattles out the relatives of those group members who had „awakened“ before Oleg. She notes with horror that Oleg was apparently involved in the „awakening“ of these people. She learns from the relatives that Stein came to see the victims personally shortly before their suicide. In Oleg's camera Inga finds photos of these suicides. Inga also finds out that the organizers of the „Black Dolphins“ act out of self-interest: before the suicide, everyone renounces, on Charon's orders, all worldly goods and bequeath his entire possessions to allegedly needy people (but in reality – the organizers of the group).

The version of Stein's involvement in the criminal activities becomes obsolete when Inga learns that he had a 20-year-old son who also committed suicide three years earlier. He was the second victim of the „Black Dolphins“. It turned out that Stein had secretly decided to do his own research to bring the criminal machinations to light. Only for this purpose he had joined the „Black Dolphins“ and was killed when he came too close to them. Based on notes that Oleg did not accidentally leave to Inga, she can uncover Charon's true identity. A face-to-face encounter she almost pays with death – the criminal ties her to a chair and forcibly gives her pills to stage a Dalida-style suicide. Inga can barely be rescued by detective Kirill Arkharov. Only with Inga's help can Kirill finally close the case of the „Black Dolphins“. She learned from Charon that there is a boss who has thought all this up. It's Chernov, the very first suicide who started it all. But he is alive. Inga finds him under a false name with his family at the Black Sea.

And as in the first crime thriller with Inga Belova, the reader is surprised by another unexpected turn in the finale. Inga finds out that the son of her housekeeper Lyusya, who was also Oleg's housekeeper, owed Oleg a very large sum of money borrowed for the purchase of an apartment. While cleaning Lyusya had found the rope as well as Oleg's suicide note, both actually only prepared by him for his investigations against the „Black Dolphins“. But Lyusya and her son took advantage of it.

The subject of psychological manipulation via social networks makes „Black Dolphins“ highly up-to-date and even more exciting, humanly dramatic and emotionally touching than Volume 1 „Black Shelf“. The mature and sophisticated dialogues – especially in the chats between Inga and the Charon – also contribute to this, making us credibly comprehend how even a strong-willed woman under the influence of a highly intelligent psychopath can reach the edge of suicide.

Maria Dolon*

Russian women's detective

#black_dolphins

Scenes of action: Moscow, Sochi

BACKGROUND

Social media create a danger beyond personal data security risks, and that danger is deadly. The "Blue Whale challenge" is reported to spread in social networks: so-called „curators“ set players 50 tasks over 50 days, the last day the user is instructed to take their own life. The challenge evolved in Russia and soon became popular around the world. It is alleged that at least two deaths among American teenagers and one in India are linked to the challenge. The first newspaper that investigated the case was Russian Novaya Gazeta. It claimed that 130 teenagers in Russia killed themselves within the challenge. The news sounds even more terrifying due to the suicide outbreak that we face worldwide. During the last decade the suicide rates have increased dramatically: in the US they are at their highest since World War II. Every year one million people die by suicide across the globe. It is true that concerns around crowd manipulation are heightened in the Information age. But does the "Blue Whale challenge" really account for teenagers' deaths? Further investigations show that the answer is not so simple. It may have been the other way round. It is the hype around the article in Novaya Gazeta that turned blue whales, a popular teenager meme, into a suicide trend. Apparently many teenagers who had no idea about the challenge started copying it after the article. The detective novel "#black_dolphins" by Maria Dolon offers its own version of the case. Inga Belova, a Moscow journalist, investigates the suicide of her close friend and gets into a trap set by online manipulators in social networks.

SUMMARY

This is the second novel in the black series. Inga Belova is conducting a journalistic investigation for her blog. She is now an independent, popular video blogger. The fame brought her previous investigation of the Black Shelf. Inga studies the machinations of a company named "Business Center of the Future" related to the reconstruction of Moscow historical monuments: under the guise of reconstruction, valuable buildings are actually destroyed - for the sake of land in the prestigious and expensive center of the capital. The heroine works with her best friend, photographer Oleg Shtein. Evidence is collected, only one step separates them from the end of the investigation. But a terrible thing happens: Inga goes to Stein's studio with their common housekeeper Lyusya, but finds him hanged. On the table is a death note written by Oleg. The death of a loved one and further investigation painfully hit the psyche of the main character, who suffers from misunderstanding and loneliness (her daughter leaves to live with her father after an angry Inga raised her hand).

Despite the facts, Inga refuses to believe in Oleg's suicide. She begins to study his life step by step. On social networks, Inga finds Stein's subscription to several "depressed" groups, including a secret one, which she learns about by entering his profile from his computer (by will, Stein left his girlfriend all his equipment and archives). This is "Black Dolphins" - a group in which Oleg was a moderator. Members are regularly updated, and on the wall, posts constantly pop up saying that another person "woke up" (that is, committed suicide). No real names. Upon joining the group, the participant receives a number and a name - in honor of a celebrity who committed suicide. Oleg was Robin Williams (hence the method of suicide - strangulation). Inga, who joins the fake account group, becomes Delilah.

A new stage of the investigation begins, during which the heroine initiates communication with the moderator Charon, meets relatives of those members of the group who „woke up“ earlier, before Oleg. And she gets horrified getting the feeling that her friend was involved in pushing the victims to suicide. Inga finds photos of suicides in Oleg's camera. She learns from relatives of the victims that, shortly before the suicide, Stein personally met all the victims. Inga also discovers that the organizers of the "Black Dolphins" act out of selfish interests: before death, on Charon's instructions, the suiciders transfer all funds to the organizers.

The version of Stein's involvement in the group's criminal activities fall apart after Inga finds out that he had a 20-year-old son who committed suicide three years ago. He was the second victim of the „Black Dolphins“ - after a certain Chernov, with the death of which the group began its activities. Inga is convinced that Stein secretly decided to conduct his own investigation and unmask the criminals. Oleg was killed when he got too close to them. That is what Inga thinks.

In the culmination scene, Inga comes face to face with Charon and almost dies - the offender binds her to a chair and feeds her with pills, trying to imitate a suicide in the style of Dalida. After that, he throws himself out of the window. However, police manage to save Inga. The heroine helps the investigation to put an end to the Black Dolphins case - Charon let out that he has a boss who developed the whole scheme. This is Chernov, the very first "suicide" with whom it all began. He is alive and well. He changed his name and lives in Sochi. It is him who receives all the benefits of suicides.

In the final, an unexpected turn is awaiting the reader. Inga proves that two people are guilty of Oleg's death - their common housekeeper Lucy and her son, who owes Oleg a large sum. During cleaning, Lucy found a rope and a suicide note by Oleg, written during one of the tasks of the "Black Dolphins", and together with her son decided to take advantage of it.

In this novel, Inga is helped by her friends from the first book: medical examiner Kholodivker, investigator Arkharov, childhood friend Edik and virtual genius Indiwind. In all the books of the series, Indiwind appears in real form, but the reader does not always realize that it is him. The book also has one murder, which is marked with a playing card "6" (connected to frauds with the reconstruction of the Kupriyan buildings).

Maria Dolon*

Russian women's detective

#black-pill

Vol. 3 of 3 (so far). Moscow 2018. 352 pages

A severed woman's head is found in a canal shaft. Although the facial features are heavily disfigured, Inga recognizes the woman again: about two years ago she had met her professionally once. The gruesome find, however, is only the first in a chain of crimes in which the journalist encounters other acquaintances from earlier times. Past and present, reality and the Internet form a dangerous tangle that Inga has to unravel before it's too late.

Maria Dolon*

women's detective novel

#black_pill

Scenes of action: Moscow, Baku, Chechnya

BACKGROUND

Is there a link between contemporary beauty industry, corruption and hybrid war? Yes, there is. It is abuse, which acquires new forms and instruments thanks to new technologies. A human is still oppressed and constrained as in the age of slavery, but he is deprived of freedom by new means: his body is abused by standards imposed by fashion corporations, his personality is abused by the government, his country is abused by the world leaders who play their big geopolitical game. The mighty reign supreme not only in dictatorships. People face this problem worldwide on all levels, as well as on the global one. Trying to avoid direct confrontation, mighty states settle their argument on the territory of politically and economically minor states. Likewise, Russia takes part in wars in Syria, Libya, Sudan and CAR by means of the so-called private military companies, among which the Wagner Group most often appears in the news. The detective novel "#black_pill" by Maria Dolon dwells upon these issues. A secret super effective weight loss aid, which appears a two-in-one product, serves a good metaphor to illustrate the way abuse works in the contemporary world.

SUMMARY

The main character, Inga Belova, a former journalist, maintains a popular blog in which she talks about her private investigations. She is divorced, raising a 14 years old daughter. Inga's friend, Kirill Arkharov, an investigator for particularly important cases, draws her to the investigation of the case of a cut off female head, which was found in a sewer. The deceased is Evelina Gee, Inga's former colleague in the glossy magazine QQ.

Using social networks, Inga identifies the victim's inner circle: school friends Lida (guide) and Tamara (actress), friend Ivan. Lida has a friend Pavel, whom she is going to marry, Tamara successfully builds a career in cinema. After meeting with them, Inga concludes that there was a quarrel between the three friends, the reason for which they carefully hide. In social networks, Inga enters the secret group „40K“, in which Evelina and Ivan distributed unknown diet pills called „Twig“. Judging by user reviews, tablets give a phenomenal result. Inga is trying to track down Ivan in a nightclub, but he escapes from her and falls under a subway train. Kirill Arkharov shows Inga the recordings of the surveillance cameras, and she sees that Ivan died, fleeing from an unknown pursuer.

Meanwhile, Cyril conducts an official investigation and accuses her friend Nikita of Evelina's murder, whom she blackmailed. Inga strongly disagrees with this version, they quarrel with Cyril. Inga continues to develop a version that Tamara could be involved in the murder of Evelina. She learns that several years ago, Tamara was in the elite "Vitaclinic" neurosis clinic. This medical institution is part of a holding owned by Areg Aghajanyan, the former chief of Inga in the QQ magazine, who had once fired her from her job. The deceased Evelina was Areg's personal assistant. Inga finds out that she was controlled by Anatoly Wertman. Taking a risky adventure, Inga gets a package of the unknown Vetazidone tablets, which, apparently, are produced by a closed laboratory located within the clinic. Inga passes the pills to her friend Zhenya Kholodivker, a medical examiner. Zhenya says that Wertmann is a friend of her youth, a brilliant chemist. The two of them visit him, especially since there is a good reason for this: Wertmann's 16-year-old daughter, Mariam, is in a 40K weight loss group. At Wertmann's house, they watch his wife frustrate her daughter for being overweight. From Mirjam's bag Inga steals the tablets "Vetochka" already known to her from social networks. Zhenya conducts a comparative analysis of the two drugs and finds out that they are based on the same active substance, but "Vetochka" contains additives that are dangerous to health.

Meanwhile, Cyril goes to his daughter in a sports and patriotic camp and brings evidence from there that help Inga understand what is happening. Areg Aghajanyan, the owner of Vitaclinic, and MP Petryaev (familiar to the reader from the first book) run a criminal business for the production of Vetazidone tablets, the formula of which comes from Wertman. They supply Vetazidone to contract soldiers - tablets have a pronounced psychotropic effect, block fear and increase strength. Business is growing, a conflict is brewing between Agadzhanian and Petryaev, they are making plans to get rid of each other.

Areg decides to use Inga's blog: give her some incriminating evidence about Petryaev so that she would expose it - she already has millions of subscribers. He invites her to a country estate for a masquerade. The hired killer, sent by Petryaev, shoots Areg at the moment when he passes a flash card to Inga. She barely manages to escape. At the masquerade, Lida, Evelina's friend, also dies, falling from a balcony. Inga sees Paul mourning her inconsolably. Incriminating evidence on Petryaev gives the video on which he humiliates and sexually abuses Tamara in the Vitaclinic. Inga understands that Tamara was lured there by deception, held by force, and Evelina is to blame. Meanwhile, Wertman's daughter Mariam is dying of complications caused by the side effects of "Vetochka". After her funeral, the desperate chemist blows up his own laboratory dying himself. Witnesses of his death are Inga and Zhenya. Here, Inga finds the latest evidence revealing the killer of Evelina Gee. It turns out to be Paul, the fiance of Lida and laboratory assistant of Wertmann. He discovered the effect of weight loss in Vetazidone and secretly from Wertmann synthesized a new drug, which he called the "Vetochka". The first experimental test person for Pavel was Lida, who lost 30 kg. Then he and Evelina set up a business: they sold "Vetochka" via social networks, attracted Ivan as a distributor. Pavel killed Evelyn when she demanded an increase in her share, pursued Ivan, and subsequently pushed Lida from the balcony when she guessed who killed her friend.

In this book, Inga develops a love story that ends with a break. As in previous books, a brutal murder was committed, marked by a black chess pawn, that is, the number „7“. It remains unsolved.

Maria Dolon*