Black Widow
by Reid Butler (2010)

When the grey winter had passed, Rosa came to sit beneath the flowering tree for the last time. There was beauty here but
never peace. In this spring of her 23rd year, the greening hillside and the blossoms of the apricot trembled with the
distant quakes of battle, skirmishes in the war that had stained her life. Even in months of fragile ceasefire, Rosa heard
inside her head the rumbling, gunfire and screaming of the Chechen wars, the sound track that played behind even her
earliest memories.

They lived in Grozny then, the gracious capital of the Caucasus that shone in times past like an opulent setting of antique
silver. A place of high culture, elegant boulevards, parks and theatres. Papa had kept a small clothing store in the city’s
heart before he was cut down by crossfire in ’94, during the first battle against the Russians.

Rosa struggled to remember that time; she had been just five years old. She remembered the smell of the burning city,
though, and the fearful nights when her mother’s sobbing crept through the house like a sick animal.

Abram was three years older than Rosa, but after Papa’s death, her brother began roaming the war torn city,
resourcefully making money for the family to survive. In the hard years that followed, he grew from an urchin into a street
warrior and it was he who organised the move away from the ruined city to the relative safety of a village farmhouse in
the mountain foothills. He chose not live with them there, preferring life in Grozny with the comrades who shared his
fierce resentment.

With schools bombed and children needed in whatever work could be had to help provide, education was an early
casualty of the long years of Chechen war. Books had been scarce at first for Rosa and reading came late, but from age
10, her skill and vocabulary grew quickly as she learned that in the turning of pages there was escape. She began to
read from the Qu’ran each day and Abram took pleasure in supplying his sister with armfuls of bought and stolen books
filled with stories from around the world. His own reading skills were basic, and he would often tell her he was happiest
on his visits when she read for him by candlelight.

By age 13, Rosa was creating her own stories, tightly scrawled tales in the thick notebooks that Abram would give her. In
the cruellest winter of the second war, when bombing in Grozny was constant, Rosa wrote fantasies about wealthy and
sophisticated characters from Chechnya’s past; artists, musicians and handsome poets swirling through glamourous
society parties and falling in love with unattainable princesses.

That was the winter that Mama died of influenza and Abram and men from the village worked all day to dig her grave in
the frozen earth. Abram left the city behind then, and on the late nights when Rosa missed her Mama the most, she
would cry on his shoulder and he would stroke her hair, whispering over and over, “Do not worry Rosa, we are together,
and when I am with you, you will be safe always.”

Abram had just turned 18 when the Russian soldiers sacked their village. The tanks came at around noon and by nightfall
the air was thick with smoke and the bawling of terrified farm animals. There was nowhere to run, and when the door
was rammed open, Rosa could only scream as three burly uniformed men crowded into the house, brandishing
Kalashnakovs.

Abram positioned himself in front of his sister, with his only weapon a heavy silver candlestick, a tarnished remnant of
another time. The Russians laughed and pushed past him to grab Rosa.
“Let her go!” Abram shouted from the floor, as he threw the candlestick at the back of one of the soldiers. The Russian let out a grunt of pain and anger and turned around and shot a bullet through Abram’s forehead.

Since that stark moment when her brother was killed, even during the rape and beating she endured after, Rosa felt she had existed in a trance, a ghost state where everything around her seemed muffled and surreal. She was hollow.

Within a year of joining the guerrilla group in the mountains, Rosa was skilled in the techniques of combat and accustomed to the workings and deadly power of the Kalashnakov and explosives.

As the spring of 2009 swept away the long, grey winter, she returned to sit beneath the flowering apricot tree on the hillside above her former home. It was here that she had buried Abram, scratching out a grave with foraged farm implements and her own small hands. Sitting among fallen petals, she whispered: “We will be together, Abram, and when I am with you, we will be safe always.”

A week later, in the crowded centre of the Russian capital, Rosa and a female comrade joined the throng of evening commuters on the subway. Jostled in the crowd, Rosa felt pure with resolve and determination.

Terror experts explained to media that when a suicide bomber detonates an explosive vest, the bomber’s chest and torso are blown to bits, but typically the head remains intact. This was how the Moscow police identified the two women at the centre of the bombings that killed 38 and left many more maimed. They were members of the Chechen rebel group known as the Black Widows, the police said, a cell of women driven by loss of loved ones to sacrifice their own lives to exact revenge.

As Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed to “destroy the filthy scum behind the vicious crime”, elsewhere, beneath an apricot tree, a warm breeze ruffled yellowing pages tightly scrawled with a young girl’s imaginings of poets and princesses in an opulent city that glowed like antique silver.