

THE
DARKENING
FIELD

WILLAM RYAN



Minotaur Books  New York

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE DARKENING FIELD. Copyright © 2011 by William Ryan. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.minotaurbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryan, William, 1965–

The darkening field / William Ryan.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-58651-5

1. Detectives—Russia (Federation)—Moscow—Fiction. 2. Young women—Crimes against—Fiction. 3. Murder—Investigation—Soviet Union—Fiction. 4. Conspiracy—Fiction. 5. Soviet Union—Politics and government—1936–1953—Fiction. 6. Mystery fiction. 7. Historical fiction.

I. Title.

PR6118.Y37D37 2012

823'.92—dc22

2011032829

First published in Great Britain as *The Bloody Meadow* by Mantle, an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited

First U.S. Edition: January 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER ONE

It was snow, or sleet, or something in between—whatever it was, it swirled around them like smoke and seemed to freeze solid as soon as it hit fabric, coating their clothes with a white sheen. It had been snowing, or sleeting, depending on your opinion, for days now and they stepped carefully along the icy path that led to their destination.

Captain Alexei Dmitriyevich Korolev followed the director of the First Mikoyan Agricultural Tooling Trust with a sense of foreboding—the two uniforms and his fellow detective Yasimov trailing behind. Korolev knew this was going to be an awkward job—it just had that feel to it. The director had said as much when they'd told him they were there to question one of his men—at first he'd been all cooperation, but when they'd told him the man's name, Shishkin, and he'd looked to see where they could find him, his attitude had changed.

“Shishkin, Shishkin, Shishkin,” he'd said, going through cards in a wooden filing cabinet. “Here we are. Ah. Workers' Hostel Seven. I should have guessed.”

Korolev was no mind reader but it was clear that “Workers' Hostel Seven” had a reputation and, now that they were walking toward

it, Korolev had a suspicion he knew what kind. The director came to a halt and pointed at a long single-story wooden building, the pitched roof seeming to bend under its thick helmet of winter snow. The hostel had no gutters and melt water had frozen along its length like a curtain that hung down till it touched the snowbank that had drifted halfway up the wall. What few small windows there were lurked high under the eaves, and several panes had been replaced with whatever had come to hand. It was the kind of place where workers, fresh from the country, turned inward, recreating their village in a space the size of a cattle barn.

This bunch wouldn't like outsiders. They wouldn't even like the citizens who lived in the hostels surrounding them. No, this place was a tiny island in the sprawling sea of the city that surrounded it. In fact, the island wasn't really in Moscow, or even in the Soviet Union—it was somewhere quite different.

"I'm not going in there, Comrade," the director said, stopping, "and I have to tell you, I don't advise you to either. I've shown you where he lays his head. If I were you, I'd wait till he comes out."

Korolev shrugged his shoulders, took a moment to look at Shishkin's photograph, then showed it to the others to refresh their memories. A wide face topped with a mop of blond hair shaved tight at the sides, a rounded, solid-looking jaw, straight lips. He didn't look like a killer—in fact there was something open and fresh about the fellow's face. But apparently Shishkin and his brother had been drinking, and alcohol, as Korolev well knew, could turn a saint into the Devil. The brother had been foreman of a rubber factory in the Frunze district and, it seemed, Shishkin had asked for a job and been refused. Small things became large when vodka coursed through men's veins—he'd had a case once where two men had been hacked to pieces on account of a pickled cucumber.

"How many people in there?" Korolev asked.

"Five hundred souls, give or take," the director said and Korolev

THE DARKENING FIELD

knew what that meant—there'd be friends and family who didn't work for the Trust, there'd have been deaths, there'd have been births. A score of rag-footed children were visible around the hostel and a good half of them wouldn't be on any list the director had.

"You see what I mean," the director said, indicating with a nod a clump of sullen men who had appeared at the nearest entrance. "My authority stops here—hell, even the Party activists don't visit this place. They've their own ways of doing things in there, and it works best for everyone if we leave them to it."

Korolev looked at the workers by the door—muscular, work-smudged, tough-standing brutes, and not overly fond of the Militia by the look of them. He took a squint at the snap of Shishkin once again.

"Well, one way or another, we have to go in and talk to him."

He glanced at the two uniforms—they didn't look any happier than the last time he'd looked, but they'd do their duty. Yasimov seemed resigned, and Korolev caught him patting the jacket pocket in which he kept his revolver. They'd all seen hostels like this before—places that followed different rules from the rest of the city around them, and were allowed to by men like the director, desperate for workers to meet the factory's quotas. Korolev started to walk toward the entrance and hoped the uniforms were following. The workers stood aside as they approached, but there was no welcome in their hard eyes, and he could hear them turning and following close behind, cutting off their escape.

He pushed open the door of the hostel and entered.

It was as he'd thought it would be—like the inside of an ants' nest, if ants were humans and lived in the city of Moscow in the year of Our Lord 1937. Everywhere there were people and their possessions. Along one wall small rooms for families had been built, like stables, and from the empty doorframes of which the lucky inhabitants had hung blankets or sheets to give themselves some privacy.

Elsewhere, however, every spare inch of floor space had been filled with beds, mattresses and sacking and on them the rest of the hostel's occupants were sleeping, sitting, playing cards, drinking, smoking and doing every other thing that a citizen might do in the comfort of his home—except that here he was sharing his living space with half a thousand others. And above the people hung wet clothing and bedding from washing lines that crisscrossed the room in no apparent order so that the ceiling was invisible. Korolev stood there taking it in, before walking slowly through the room, scanning each face as he did so, and finding himself being examined with the same care in return.

Korolev kept moving forward, pushing gently past the people who stood in the space between the cubicles and the beds, looking for Shishkin. At least it was warm, he thought to himself, even if it was the warmth of a shed full of cattle—the cast-iron stoves that lined the center of the room every seven or eight yards probably gave out less heat than the people crammed in around them. There was no point in asking for the fellow, no one here would tell him anything. Already their presence was like a pebble thrown into a pond—a ripple of silence rolled out from them, till it seemed that the loudest noise in the place was the heavy tread of his hobnailed heels on the wooden floorboards. He cursed the boots, only four months old and things of beauty, but as out of place here as a crystal chandelier. They labeled him as well, and it wasn't a label he much liked to have applied. Still, at least the silent faces turning toward him one after another, grimy white against their work-soiled clothes, made his search for Shishkin that much easier.

The hostel was split into two main rooms, with a cooking and washing area separating the two, and the farther they advanced toward the center of the building the less the noise of his boots was evident. There were other noises—coughing, the rustle of clothes,

THE DARKENING FIELD

the snoring of sleeping workers, dripping water, the cluck of a chicken picking its way between the beds. There was still no sign of Shishkin, but that might be the least of their problems. Women and children were being ushered into the cubicles and young men woken from their sleep to stand and examine the Militiamen with bleary eyes. Korolev could hear people following them through the building, but he didn't look around. If he looked, he'd have to confront them, and that would mean trouble. He squared his shoulders and marched on, feeling the sudden heat from the cooking area, where red-faced women crouched over thermos stoves—the sound of them like the roar of a blast furnace.

The second room was the same as the first and, again, their arrival had a pronounced effect. A youth with tousled hair was playing the accordion but the music came to a sliding halt when he saw the brown pointed *budyenny* caps of the two uniforms. Other gray winter faces turned toward them, watching them, wondering what the four intruders wanted. In the far corner a white-haired man, a thin beard under a hawk's nose, read to a circle of men and women, their heads bowed. It wasn't Korolev's business but he'd wager a month's salary it was a Bible he was reading from and that the man was a former priest. The reader looked up and, without taking his eyes away from the intruders, said a few quiet words which resulted in the silent dispersal of his audience. Korolev watched him place the book in a bag, and sit down on a bed to watch their approach. There was no fear in the man's eyes, but Korolev looked away anyway, trying to make it clear it wasn't him they were after.

It was this turning his gaze away that brought the sleeping Shishkin to his attention. The shock of blond hair was the same, but the face was not so open any more. Moscow hadn't been kind to the smiling youth—someone had hit that nose of his once or twice and left it crooked, and a half-healed scar had replaced most of his left

eyebrow. Korolev leaned down to shake Shishkin awake, ignoring the people pushing in behind him, and the gathering of men blocking the only visible exit. He'd deal with those problems when the time came.

"Wake up, Citizen."

The young fellow reeked of alcohol and hadn't shaved for a day or two and, when he turned in his sleep, Korolev couldn't help but notice the dark spatters on the sleeping man's filthy clothing and the black crust of dried blood on his wrist as he lifted a hand to his face. Korolev shook him again and Shishkin's eyes were suddenly wide open—as if he'd been disturbed from a bad dream.

"Shishkin, Ivan Nikolayevich Shishkin—that's you, am I right?"

Shishkin managed to focus and then nodded slowly, even though he seemed unsure of the answer.

"I'm Korolev, Captain Korolev of the Moscow Criminal Investigation Division. From Petrovka Street."

He could hear his words being relayed back through the building. They'd know Petrovka Street—it was famous in its own way. A Soviet Scotland Yard, or so it was said.

"What do you want?" Shishkin said, his voice still slurred from drink.

"Where were you last night, Citizen?"

Something stirred in the young man's eyes, not quite recollection but certainly unease.

"Here. I was here."

"What's this on your hand, Citizen? Is it blood?"

"I don't know. I had some drink. What of it? Maybe I got into a fight."

"Were you at your brother's? Is that where you were drinking? At Tolya's?"

"No, I was here." But Shishkin wasn't even convincing himself.

"His neighbor saw you go inside at eight o'clock. Then later on

THE DARKENING FIELD

he heard you and your brother argue. And then a commotion. And then silence. That was you, wasn't it?"

Shishkin didn't argue. His eyes were focused on the night before, trying to remember, not wanting to.

"He's dead, Citizen," Korolev said, and Shishkin's face drained of color. Perhaps he remembered something—perhaps in his mind's eye he could see his brother's face just before he'd hit him for the first time.

"That blood on your hand—where did it come from?" Korolev asked again.

"Blood?" Shishkin said. "What blood?"

Korolev waited till the boy looked down at the dried blood that ringed his wrist and stained his jacket. Waited till he saw Shishkin swallow hard at the sight of it.

"How did you get back here? Did you walk?"

"I don't know."

"So you were there?"

"No," Shishkin said, his eyes sliding away from Korolev's.

"You'll have to come with us, Citizen. You have some questions to answer."

"It's all a lie. The neighbor is lying. I was here. The neighbor killed him, like as not. He wanted his room—it was a good room. To kill a man for a room—the Devil himself wouldn't do such a thing."

Korolev turned—he saw shock in the nearer faces.

"Can anyone confirm that this man was here last night between eight and eleven? Anyone?"

Korolev looked around and thought there was just a chance this might turn out all right. A small chance.

"Why would I kill my own brother?" Shishkin asked into the silence. "You know what these fellows are like, brothers—they'll make up any lie against you. Don't let me pay for another man's crime."

The workers stayed silent, considering the point, and Korolev could feel the matter going against him.

“There are fingerprints on the hammer, Citizen. If they aren’t yours, you’ll be safe enough. You have my word on it.”

An older man, with bright blue eyes in a florid, bearded face, made his way through the crowd, followed by a woman. The woman had an oval face, skin roughened from years in the fields and straight gray hair pulled back under a white handkerchief. These would be the leaders of the hostel.

“Vanya, swear to us you’d nothing to do with this,” the woman said, her voice almost as deep as a man’s. A pleasant voice, but firm as a rock.

“Nothing, I promise you. I was here. No one remembers because I was asleep.”

“Why aren’t you surprised, Citizen? Your brother is murdered and all you do is deny you killed him. And why no grief for your brother?” Korolev’s words hung heavy in the air, and he could see out of the corner of his eye men nodding at the point. It was important he only looked at Shishkin—though he wasn’t sure why. Perhaps because his cold gaze was having some effect on the young man.

“You’re twisting things—that’s what you devils do. He was my own brother, I could never hurt him.”

“What about the blood, Citizen?” Korolev pressed, asking the questions he knew his audience wanted answered.

“What blood? A fight, that’s all. This is what you do to men. Wake them up and tell them things. Confuse them. He’s alive is all I know.”

“He’s dead,” Korolev said flatly. “He was hit with a hammer. Three times. The first blow shattered his left cheekbone.”

Korolev placed his thumb on Shishkin’s face where the hammer had struck.

“The next glanced off his right cheek and broke his collarbone.”

Again Korolev mimicked the blow, this time hitting the boy a

THE DARKENING FIELD

light blow on the shoulder. Then he placed his middle finger on top of the boy's head.

"The last, the order may be wrong, it doesn't matter, but this blow hit him here, punched a two-inch-wide hole and split his skull from back to front. I was with the doctor when he examined him. Your brother's dead all right."

Shishkin flinched each time Korolev touched him and his voice wasn't much more than a whisper when he answered.

"I didn't do anything to Tolya. I swear to you, I loved him."

"Perhaps you were angry with him?"

"This is all lies—I haven't seen him for weeks. He's still alive, I know he is."

The bearded man glanced up at Korolev. "Tolya's dead, then?"

"Dead as a man with a hammer through his skull."

"It could have been any hooligan from the street. There's no reason it should have been our Vanya."

"Except he was seen entering Tolya's room shortly before he died and seen leaving it soon afterward. If it's some other fellow's fingerprints on the hammer, then we need to do some thinking. But at the moment it looks like your Vanya here is our man. I have to take him with me."

A reaction moved through the crowd as he said this—a squaring of shoulders, a step forward, a scowl—at least some of them would like to stop him taking Shishkin anywhere. He looked at the elders for an answer, wondering what was going through their minds. They'd carved out a little bit of independence for themselves in this hovel of a hostel, it was true, but even they must know that they'd have to give him up sooner or later.

"I give you my word: if the fingerprints don't match then he'll be coming back. But this is murder, Comrades. He has to come with me."

The bearded man shook his head slowly. "I can't believe Vanya would do something like this."

The Bible reader with the hooked nose stepped forward. He spoke quietly, but it was clear he had some authority in the hostel and the bearded elder looked relieved by his interruption.

“Vanya, tell us what you remember from last night, and where you were.”

“I was here, all night.”

“You weren’t, Vanya. You didn’t come home until after the third shift. Did you visit Tolya?”

The youth’s face seemed to crumple in on itself.

“Yes, I was there,” the boy sobbed.

“And you drank.”

“I did, the Lord forgive me, I did. But I don’t remember what happened. I couldn’t have killed him, I couldn’t have.”

Shishkin’s hands rubbed at his face, making it difficult to hear what he was saying, but Korolev had heard enough. He put his hand on Shishkin’s shoulder and spoke softly.

“Stand up now, Shishkin. Walk with us to the car.”

Shishkin did as he was told and Korolev, his hand moving to the man’s elbow, guided him. One or two of the workers looked as though they wanted to prevent them leaving but the Bible reader shook his head, and they backed away.

Outside the cold was like a slap in the face and it seemed to unnerve Shishkin, who turned as if to make his way back in, but the Bible reader took his other arm and walked with them. Men and women spilled out of the hostel behind them and followed in silence, ignoring the drifting snowflakes. The only sounds were the wail of a far-off factory whistle and the crunch of feet as they made their way toward the waiting car. Shishkin’s head was bowed and Korolev could feel the sobs that spasmed through him.

“What will happen to me, holy father?” he whispered to the Bible reader, who looked at Korolev for his reaction. Korolev was careful to give none.

THE DARKENING FIELD

“Put yourself into the hands of the Lord, Vanya. Pray to him and the Virgin and the saints. Pray for forgiveness and I will pray for you as well. We all will.” His voice was very quiet, and Korolev hoped the uniforms couldn’t hear.

When they reached the car, the uniforms put Shishkin in the back seat and sat on either side of him—the boy looked small between them. Korolev turned to the priest, maintaining a neutral expression.

“Thank you, Comrade. Your assistance was most useful. We’ll commend your actions to the director.”

The Bible reader took Korolev’s offered hand, perhaps wondering how Korolev could do that if he didn’t have his name. But Korolev didn’t want to know the priest’s name—he just wanted to go home and put this day behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

Maybe the potholes the car had bounced over on the way had shaken the youngster's brain awake, but by the time they brought Shishkin back to Petrovka Street, his memory had returned to him. He'd cursed himself, sobbed, banged his head with his hands, and Korolev had taken the confession that tumbled out of the boy, stopping him every now and then to clarify a point. It was a depressing tale and when it was finished the boy rubbed at his blood-cruste sleeves and asked himself the question Korolev wanted to put to him: "Why?" And the answer eluded them both. Yes, he'd wanted a job at the rubber factory, but not enough to kill his own brother. But he remembered killing him all right, and so Korolev wrote it all down and then handed the confession to him to sign. And Shishkin signed it—tears blurring the ink. Korolev patted the youth's shoulder and then had the uniforms take him down to the cells.

It hadn't been a difficult case, but Korolev felt satisfaction that they'd resolved it so quickly as he began to put the file in order for the procurator's office. But the sense of pleasure at a job well done disappeared when the page he was holding started to rustle loudly. He quickly placed it on the surface of his desk, holding it flat and

THE DARKENING FIELD

pushing down, staring at his whitening knuckles, knowing that this was the only way he could stop his hands shaking. It was just that everything was on top of him all of a sudden, he reassured himself, that was all. It had been a long winter, and the Lord knew even the bravest got low during the winter months. And when had he last breathed easily? He remembered a time long before, a summer's day, lying beside a river, his arm around Zhenia, and Yuri sleeping beside them in the shade of the tree. When had that been? The divorce had come through more than two years ago, and they hadn't been happy like that for a good time before it. And his son had been small, very small, and his hair still baby soft. Three years ago, maybe?

"Damn," he breathed, realizing it had been five years at least, and Yasimov looked up in surprise from the report he was writing. Korolev made himself smile, feeling it stretch his mouth taut. Yasimov returned it, giving him a small nod of appreciation.

"For a moment there, Lyoshka, I was wondering how they'd break the news to the family. You handled it well." Yasimov stretched back, releasing a contented sigh. "I tell you what, though—a scrape that close makes the air smell sweet."

"Yes," Korolev agreed, thinking that the air would smell even sweeter if he could get a good night's sleep. It had got to the stage recently when he'd wondered whether there was any point in taking off his clothes at night, so little time did he spend in his bed. But tonight he'd get eight hours, do some washing, eat some hot food.

"To kill your own brother," Yasimov said, shaking his head.

"Alcohol has no family," Korolev replied, reaching for another file he was working on.

"Still, nothing is all bad, you know," Yasimov said, looking as though he was contemplating stopping off somewhere on the way home.

"I can't disagree with that," Korolev said. "The world wasn't made in black and white."

WILLIAM RYAN

Not at all, he thought to himself; it was mainly gray, the gray of twilight, the gray of the night's beginning.

Korolev's nerves had settled by the time he walked down the wide steps of 38 Petrovka Street and began to make his way home through the still-busy streets of Moscow. He took the longer way, heading toward the Kremlin and through Red Square, passing the recently installed red star that topped the Spassky Tower and glowed like a bright beacon of hope against the black sky above it. It reassured him for a moment, and he felt a surge of pride that he was fortunate enough to be a Soviet citizen, living in the capital of a country that was leading the world by example. But then he remembered the fear throughout the city, particularly among Party members. The works meetings in Petrovka Street were no longer the calm affairs of six months before, but instead had become steadily more and more hysterical. Activists denounced each other for lack of vigilance, for concealing class origins, for having been former Mensheviks or, even worse, supporters of the exiled Trotsky. And every now and then one of his colleagues would disappear.

Korolev kept his head low, sat at the back and was grateful that he'd never joined the Party. But even non-Party members weren't safe—the State expected complete loyalty from all of its citizens and, while he'd fought with the Red Army during the Civil War and had supported the Revolution for twenty years now, Korolev still had allegiances to individuals and beliefs that would put him at risk if they ever came to light.

As it had turned out, however, that icon business he'd been involved with the previous year, the most blatant example of his divided allegiances, had ended up working in his favor in unexpected ways. The matter remained top secret, which was probably just as

THE DARKENING FIELD

well from Korolev's point of view, but the injuries he'd suffered in the course of the investigation pointed to it having been a dangerous matter, on top of which Korolev now wore on his chest a mysterious Order of the Red Star that he was forbidden to discuss. According to Yasimov, most people thought he'd uncovered a counterrevolutionary plot and had personally assisted the NKVD, or the Chekists as they were commonly known after an older acronym, in the violent suppression of the conspiracy. It was almost true, after a fashion, but no one in Petrovka Street except for his boss knew the real story, and even Popov didn't know all of it.

Still, for the moment at least, the dark red enameled star that General Popov had ordered he wear on his chest while on duty, whether in uniform or not, had created a bubble around Korolev, and even around Yasimov. Korolev wasn't complacent, though, far from it. After all, if some of his actions during the icon affair ever became public, they'd result in his immediate reacquaintance with the interior of a Lubyanka cell. So for the foreseeable future he wanted to keep well clear of anything connected with the Chekists until they forgot he'd ever existed. And, until he was confident they had, he'd carry on keeping a small packed suitcase in his bedroom wardrobe just in case they came for him one night with a one-way ticket for Siberia.

Korolev found himself at the door of the building he lived in on Bolshoi Nikolo-Vorobinsky and began to kick the snow from his boots before opening the heavy front door, light spilling out into the lane as he did so; and as if to remind him that his concerns weren't just groundless paranoia, he caught sight of the red seal that had been applied to Kotov's apartment door by State Security only the previous week and which swung gently in the resulting draft. Poor Kotov had been an administrator with a government ministry until his arrest, but he'd had the nervous stoop and gray pallor of a condemned man for the best part of a month before it. Now he and his wife had disappeared and the only trace of their passing was that damned red seal

that would swing there till the apartment was cleared and reallocated. Korolev reminded himself that he was alive, climbing the stairs to an apartment which he shared with the beautiful Valentina Nikolaevna, and by anyone's standards he was a lucky man. He had to remember that. Tomorrow would look after itself.

He could hear Natasha's laugh as he turned the key in the lock, but by the time he entered their shared room Valentina's daughter was sitting grave-faced at the table—her eyes focused on the exercise book in which she was writing. She didn't even look up at him. Valentina Nikolaevna, on the other hand, stood from the battered Chesterfield, putting aside the book she was reading. Every time he saw her he felt his mood lift—a man could dive into those sea-blue eyes of hers and swim to the horizon.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

They'd come to an arrangement over the last few months—she'd often cook for him, or leave something out for him if he was late and, in exchange, he shared his food parcel with her. It was a domestic arrangement and he was sure there was fondness on her part. For a while, he'd dared to hope a closer relationship might develop, but he wasn't the kind of man she needed. A battered, middle-aged *Ment* with a job that kept him busy most of his waking hours? She could do better, that was for sure. No, a beautiful woman like her deserved a man who could look after her properly, and who she could be proud of. She'd find someone soon enough, he suspected—and then he'd probably be back to cooking for himself.

“We had to arrest a fellow on the outskirts,” Korolev said, aware that he'd been looking at her in silence for a moment longer than was polite, and cursing himself. “A murder. It took a while to get the paperwork in order. Anyway, I picked up the parcel from the canteen. Shall we see what we've got?”

He put the package on the table in the small cooking area, feeling that his mouth was not entirely within his control. What was it

THE DARKENING FIELD

about her that made him babble like a fourteen-year-old? Sometimes he wished he'd never met the woman, but that was a feeling that never lasted for long. What sort of life would it be if he hadn't?

Korolev wasn't asleep when the knock at the door came. Thinking about it afterward, he wondered if the car pulling up outside had woken him. It wasn't inconceivable: his bedroom window faced the alleyway and the ZIS would have made a rattle against the snow-swaddled silence of the Moscow night. And, of course, at that time of the morning the streets belonged to the black cars of State Security, and the sound of an engine coming to a halt would have a whole street fearing the worst.

So Korolev was awake, but if it was the car that woke him he'd no memory of it. Instead he was only conscious that he'd been dreaming of that time by the river, only this time it had been Valentina Nikolaevna his arm encircled, and Natasha who'd been sleeping beside them. The memory of the dream was still strong enough for him to feel the weight of the sun on his face and joy rolling up him like a wave. For those two or three moments before the knock came he could have floated up to the ceiling with happiness if his body's weight hadn't kept him fixed to the bed.

Three knocks. One. Two. Three. Not much noise, after all, but enough to shatter that moment as if it had been a glass hurled against a wall.

Ever since he'd seen poor Kotov being marched away in his pajamas, Korolev had slept ready for an immediate departure and he was pulling on his trousers and boots before he'd even worked out what was happening. The mysterious knuckles battered the door again, louder this time, and more insistent, but Korolev took the time to put on an extra vest, take his warmest jumper and his winter coat and

pick up the small bag he'd packed for just such an event, before walking through the shared room. He stopped for a moment and looked around and it occurred to him he might never see this place again. Well, if that was what the Lord intended, then there wasn't much point dwelling on it.

There was another knocking, more insistent now, and Valentina Nikolaevna's outline appeared in the doorway, Natasha's sleepy voice coming from behind her, asking a question that he couldn't quite hear. He shook his head sharply, waving her back in to her daughter, but she didn't move, waiting until he came closer before putting a hand on his chest. He leaned forward, unable to stop himself, and breathed in the scent of her newly washed hair but at the same time remembered himself enough to gently push her back into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. There was no time to say anything or even to consider what her action might have meant before he turned, inhaling deeply, and opened the door to the hallway.

Korolev blinked, dazzled for a moment by the light on the landing, before managing to focus on the man in front of him. There was only one of them, which was odd, and Korolev leaned forward slightly to see if there were others hiding in the corridor. The young Chekist smiled at his reaction and that irritated Korolev—if he was to be arrested he'd like to be treated with respect.

"Going somewhere?" the lad asked. No more than twenty-five, he'd guess. His deep-set eyes were obscured by shadow, but Korolev had the impression the pup was laughing at him.

"You tell me," Korolev answered, sneaking another look to see where the rest of them were waiting.

"Yes, we have a short trip to make. To the Lubyanka."

Again that teasing little smile—it was making Korolev's fist itch.

"Well, I'm ready."

"Good. We must always be prepared. At any time of day or night."

THE DARKENING FIELD

Now the fellow was quoting Party slogans at him. Korolev could feel his confusion creasing his forehead into a frown.

“Look, Comrade, it’s half past two in the morning,” Korolev began before he ran out of words. *Am I to be arrested?* was what he wanted to ask, but he didn’t dare voice the thought.

“And you have your bag packed ready for a trip—that’s good.” The youngster was grinning now, nodding at the case Korolev had placed beside the door.

Korolev swallowed, feeling his mouth dry as paper, and found he’d taken a great dislike to this unimpressive representative of State Security. But then he had a sudden surge of hope—the fellow wasn’t here to arrest him. The rascal was making fun of him because he *wasn’t* here to arrest him.

“Look, Comrade,” Korolev said, confidence returning to his voice, “either tell me what your business is, or let me go back to my bed.”

The Chekist seemed to relent. “You don’t need the suitcase, Comrade. Colonel Rodinov wants a few minutes of your time—that’s all. The phone system is down so we couldn’t call. I’ve a car outside. My name is Todorov.”

Korolev didn’t shake the Chekist’s hand, or respond to his introduction. Instead he picked up his overcoat and nodded toward the stairs to indicate he’d follow the fellow. He thought for a moment of going in to reassure Valentina Nikolaevna, but decided against it. He wasn’t out of the woods yet.

Korolev had been waiting in a narrow room, so narrow and so long it was almost a corridor, for the best part of an hour. A stern-looking Dzerzhinsky, the original People’s Commissar of State Security, looked down from a poster beside the far door warning him to “Be

on your guard!," which Korolev thought was sensible advice, tired though he was.

He was about to look in his pocket for a cigarette when there was a bang that sounded like a door slamming shut and the click of approaching footsteps. Then the young Chekist who'd picked him up at Bolshoi Nikolo-Vorobinsky entered, the uniform he'd changed into crisp against the drab blue walls.

"He's ready, Comrade. He had some matters to attend to."

Rodinov had changed in the short time since they'd last met. His skin was pale and flabby, whereas before it had been pink and taut, and his round, hairless head no longer seemed to shine with brutal vigor. The eyes that looked up from the file on the table were blood-shot and tired and the greeting he gave Korolev was nothing more than a grunt and a nod of his head toward the single chair in front of the desk at which he sat.

"Korolev," he said after a moment or two, his eyes narrowing as he glared at him, as if willing Korolev to admit his guilt, even if he was guilty of nothing.

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. Korolev. You sent for me."

"I did," the colonel said, and it wasn't immediately clear whether he was questioning the suggestion or agreeing with it. He looked back down at the file in front of him.

"Are you prepared to undertake a confidential mission connected with the security of the State, Captain Korolev?"

Well, there was only one answer to that question.

"Of course, Comrade Colonel."

"Good." Rodinov pushed a photograph across to him. "Then it's settled. Maria Alexandrovna Lenskaya. She was, until last night, a production assistant on Comrade Savchenko's new film. Now she's dead."

THE DARKENING FIELD

Korolev examined the girl in the photograph.

“Murder?”

The colonel seemed to consider the question, smelling his way around the answer in that fighting-dog way of his.

“Apparently not,” he said, seeming to produce the words reluctantly. “She killed herself, or so we’re told. But we want to make certain, which is where you come in.”

“I see. When did it happen?”

“She was found at ten o’clock this evening.”

“Has anyone looked at the body? A pathologist, I mean—I’d recommend Chestnova at the Institute if not.”

“No one has examined her and she died in the Ukraine, near Odessa, so I don’t think Chestnova will be much use. And we want this matter handled very quietly. At least until we have a better idea of the situation. Comrade Ezhov himself thought of you—he formed a favorable impression from that matter you assisted with last year. He recalled your tenacity, and your discretion.” That slight emphasis on the word “discretion” was setting off warning bells. Korolev was wide awake now, that was for sure.

“I’m grateful he recalls me favorably,” Korolev said, thinking exactly the opposite.

“A great honor. And, as it turns out, your friend Babel is writing the film’s screenplay—a happy coincidence.”

“I see,” Korolev said, wondering why me? Surely there was someone in Odessa who could handle this.

“We think it best if you go there by chance. I’ve spoken to Comrade Popov and in recognition of your excellent performance in recent months, you’ve been awarded a two-week holiday—to be spent where you wish. You wish it to be spent near Odessa. It isn’t the summer down there, but it isn’t as cold as Moscow—so why wouldn’t you visit your good friend and neighbor, Babel? Isaac Emmanuilovich will be made aware of your true purpose and will no doubt do his

best to help with your inquiries. One of our more competent Ukrainian operatives, a Major Mushkin, is coincidentally at the location on sick leave but will assist if necessary. If it's suicide, you have two weeks to spend as you please. If it's something else—well, I'm sure the local Militia would be grateful for the assistance of an experienced Moscow detective. You will, however, report to me. The local Militia will be involved only to the extent that you consider necessary. Understood?"

Korolev understood. He looked at the girl's face once again. She seemed an ordinary person—not bad-looking to be sure, but at the same time not visibly worthy of the attention she seemed to be getting.

"A few questions, Comrade Colonel?"

Rodinov opened his hands to signify his agreement.

"Who is she?"

Rodinov paused and considered the question for a moment or two, his gaze dropping to the dead girl's photograph before returning to Korolev. He sighed.

"If I tell you she's a personal friend of Comrade Ezhov's, will that make more sense of the situation for you?"

Korolev felt his left eyebrow rising despite his best efforts to keep his face completely immobile, but the colonel shook his head.

"Don't jump to conclusions, Korolev. As you know, we're surrounded by enemies, both within our borders and beyond them. We have to remain vigilant—careful of even the most innocuous event in case it reveals treachery. The girl was known to Comrade Ezhov—yes. He took an interest in her, as senior Party members often take in younger comrades who promise much for the future. Because of the connection he considers it prudent to make sure there are no suspicious circumstances. The commissar doesn't understand why a young comrade of Lenskaya's prospects and ability would kill herself. He wonders whether there might be more to it."

THE DARKENING FIELD

Korolev didn't for a moment believe that Ezhov's interest in the pretty girl was that of a fatherly older Bolshevik for a young protégée, but he wasn't about to disagree with Rodinov's version of the story. After all, he still had a working brain and a strong instinct for self-preservation. As for the girl, he'd keep an open mind.

"It will take me some time to get there by train," he said.

"There's a plane leaving for Odessa from the Central Airport in two hours and twenty-five minutes. You've just got time to go home and pick up some clothes. Todorov will take you. Someone will meet you at the airport with the information we've pulled together on this matter—you can read it on the way."

Korolev had never been on a plane before and had never expected to be on one either. The prospect took him aback for a moment. The colonel seemed to interpret this as concern about the nature of his mission.

"Look, Korolev. In this case, it's important we act carefully and establish the truth. We could use the local Militia people, but we want to have direct control of this and someone we know working on it. We could send in the local Chekists, but our people can be too enthusiastic. Certainly, if it's murder, we might think again—but for the moment it's your case."

"A few things, then," Korolev said, pulling himself together. "A pathologist should examine her immediately."

"No one will examine her until you're there."

"But, Colonel—" Korolev began, before Rodinov interrupted him.

"You are Comrade Ezhov's eyes and ears. You are to be present at every stage of this investigation."

"But bodies deteriorate, and there are tests that must be done as soon as possible to determine time and means of death."

"Let me remind you, Captain, that as far as the world is concerned this is a suicide, nothing more, and we don't want to do anything that might suggest otherwise. Let me ask you—would the Militia haul a

pathologist all the way from Odessa in the middle of the night for a suicide? These days?”

A fair point, Korolev conceded. Self-homicide had become so common recently that it would be rare for a pathologist to see the body at all. Rodinov nodded, seeing that Korolev understood.

“The body has been moved to an ice house so it won’t deteriorate, and a pathologist will visit tomorrow at the same time as you arrive. Anything else?”

“If possible, the place where she died should be protected—if it turns out to be murder there’s no need to make the forensics men’s job any more difficult than it has to be.”

“I’ll pass that on.”

There wasn’t much else to be said, so Korolev placed the photograph back on the desk and stood up, ready to go. Rodinov also stood and walked him to the door, placing a hand on Korolev’s shoulder.

“This is an opportunity to perform a useful service for Comrade Ezhov—remember that. He doesn’t forget his friends.”

Korolev nodded, thinking of the dead girl, and wondering whether, these days, it was such a good thing to be Commissar Ezhov’s friend.