

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 sleet, 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 towards it, Korolev had a suspicion he knew what kind. The director came to a halt and pointed at a long single-storey wooden building, the pitched roof seeming to bend under its thick helmet of winter snow. The hostel had no gutters and melt water had

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frozen along its length like a curtain that hung down till it touched the snow bank 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 inwards, recreating their village in a space the size of a cattle barn.

This lot 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 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.

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‘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 towards 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.

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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 floorspace 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

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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 criss-crossed 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 centre of the room every seven or eight metres 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 labelled him as well, and it wasn't a label he much liked to have applied. Still, at least the silent faces turning towards 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 further they advanced towards the centre of the building the less the noise of his boots was evident. There were other noises – coughing, the rustle of clothes, 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 round. If he looked,

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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 primus 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 grey winter faces turned towards 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 leant 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

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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 neighbour saw you go inside at eight o'clock. Then later on 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 colour. 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?'

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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 neighbour is lying. I was here. The neighbour 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 grey 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.

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‘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 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 five-centimetre-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.’

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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 afterwards. 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.'

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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 spilt 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 towards 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.

'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 onto 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.