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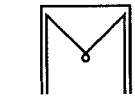
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WILLIAM RYAN

THE HOLY THIEF



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IN THE still air of the sacristy the only sounds were the slow dripping of her blood onto the marble floor and the faint whisper of her breathing. In, out, in, out – then a lengthy pause before the ragged rhythm began again. She was nearly gone.

It had been a messy business. She'd bled a lot, which was to be expected, although it still made him uncomfortable. But what else could he have done? When there wasn't time to unpick a person mentally, to grind them down – then you had to use pain and terror. Even if it wasn't necessarily the most professional, or even the most effective, approach. He'd hoped he could shock her into submission, but, in the end, she'd simply outlasted the time he'd had available. It was a shame. Sometimes he only had to put on one of the gauntlets, slowly, perhaps making a fist so that the stiff leather creaked as it stretched across his knuckles, and that would be enough. They'd start gabbling so fast the only problem was having a typist quick enough to keep up with them. He preferred it that way, of course – they were more pleasant, the straightforward interrogations. But for every gabbling goose there was a rock – and the girl had been of the granite variety.

Everything he'd tried had failed. If he'd had more time, maybe he would have succeeded, but he'd only had these two hours. Two hours for a mind like that? Strong – closed tight like a metal box. It wasn't enough. They wouldn't be happy, but what did they expect? He'd warned them after all. If he could have softened her up first – no sleep for a few days, a hot cell, a freezing cell, complete darkness, complete

silence. Well, then he could have made some progress. With time and the right tools he could have found out things from her she didn't even know she knew herself. Instead, he'd had nothing to work with, really – just his leather apron, his gauntlets and a couple of hours in the back of some church.

He didn't like that either. It was sanctioned, of course – at the highest levels they'd said. But even so. If he was disturbed, the situation would be difficult to explain – particularly now, with her blood pooling underneath the altar. Anyone coming in off the street would think he was a madman.

Her breathing slowed again and he looked down at his evening's work. Her eyes, two huge black pupils surrounded by a narrow halo of gold-flecked almond, had accepted what was happening to her, and the light was slowly dimming in them. He looked for fear, but there was none. It often happened that way; at a certain point they went past fear, and even pain, and it was the Devil's own job to bring them back. He leant in closer, wondering if one of these days he might catch a glimpse of the next world through eyes such as hers. He searched, but there was nothing – her gaze was fixed on the ceiling above them and that was all. There was a painting up there of the saints in heaven, and maybe her gaze was fixed on that. He moved his head forward to block her view, but her eyes just looked straight through him.

At least when he was this close to her the stench was less oppressive. He could still detect the damp syrupy smell of her blood, but there was also the scent of soap and wet hair and something about the mixture that reminded him of a child. He remembered it from when his son had been newly born – a warm, happy aroma that had filled his heart. He wondered where she'd found the soap – there was little in the ordinary shops this year. You might get some in a closed shop or a currency shop, but even then it wasn't always available. He puzzled about the soap for a moment, and then remembered – she'd probably brought it with her. American soap. Of course, that made sense. Capitalist soap.

Still, he was surprised to feel something approaching sympathy for the girl. Tears had washed away some of the blood from her cheeks and

she looked quite beautiful, her delicate nostrils dilating minutely as she breathed. He held his own breath for a moment, irrationally concerned that exhaling might fog those bottomless eyes of hers. He swallowed and then put the emotion aside. This was no time for self-indulgence. From the very first day, they'd drummed into him the dangers of misplaced pity, and the mistakes it caused. He'd have to revive her, make one last effort.

He put a finger to her neck: the pulse was still there, but barely detectable. He stood up and reached for the smelling salts. There was blood on the bottle – he'd used it twice already – and a part of him wanted to let her go in peace, but he had his instructions, and even if the likelihood she'd tell him anything was remote, there was still a chance. He uncorked the bottle and pulled her head towards him. She tried to twist away from his hand, but the movement was weak.

There seemed to be no change at first, but, when he turned to put the bottle back in his bag, her eyes followed him and, what was more, she seemed to be trying to speak. He picked up his knife and ran the blade down along her cheek, cutting skin and material together in his hurry to remove the gag. She coughed as he pulled the cloth away – blood had smeared her white teeth and he noted how thin and grey her lips were. Her breathing had quickened with the effort, but now she calmed a little, swallowed and focused on him. He leant slightly to the side to hear what she might say, without breaking eye contact, and she whispered something indistinct. He shook his head and leant further forward, waiting for her to try again. She took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving his.

'I forgive you,' she said, and it was almost as if he amused her.

Chapter One

IT WAS later than usual when Captain Alexei Dmitriyevich Korolev climbed the steps in front of Number 38 Petrovka Street, headquarters of the Moscow Militia's Criminal Investigation Division. The morning had started badly, wasn't getting any better and he still hadn't shaken off the pounding vodka headache from the night before, so it was with weary resignation rather than Stakhanovite enthusiasm that he pushed open one of the heavy oak doors. It took his eyes, dazzled from walking into the flat morning sun, a moment to adjust to the relative darkness of the vestibule, and it didn't help that thick clouds of masonry dust swirled around where he'd expected to find uniformed duty officers and bustling activity. He stopped for a moment, confused, wondering what on earth was going on and looking for a source of all the dust and debris. He was rewarded with a blurred movement that shifted the billowing haze on the landing – up where the statue of former General Commissar of State Security, Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda, stood. The movement was cut short by the crash of something very solid hitting what he strongly suspected was the plinth on which the commissar's statue rested. The noise, amplified by the marble floor and walls of the atrium, hit Korolev like a slap.

Korolev moved forward warily and began to climb the staircase towards the landing where the statue stood, fragments crunching underfoot. The commissar, swathed in blankets, was a

muffled shape around the base of which four workers, stripped to the waist, toiled with crowbars, hammers and a mechanical drill which now thudded into action. Their objective appeared to be the statue's removal, but the plinth appeared to have other ideas. As Korolev approached, a worker looked up at him and smiled, white teeth cracking open a face plastered with grey dust.

'They meant the Comrade Commissar to stay here until the building fell down around him,' he shouted over the racket. 'He's cemented into the floor itself. We'll be lucky to get him out in one piece.'

Korolev saw the sledgehammer, wielded by one of the worker's comrades, arc through the air once again, hitting a metal chisel that scattered debris in all directions as it wedged itself further underneath the marble block on which the commissar stood. Korolev swallowed several times in an attempt to return some saliva to a tongue that felt like he'd eaten sand.

'There. He shifted. We'll have him out yet,' the hammer-wielder called to his fellows, spitting. The gob landed black on a piece of rubble at his feet. Korolev nodded thoughtfully, a stratagem he found useful when he'd no idea what was going on, and took a tentative step forward. As far as he was aware, Yagoda was still a senior Politburo member and entitled to the respect such a position was due – but clearly something had changed if his statue was being removed.

Korolev mumbled a gruff but firm, 'Good morning, Comrades,' as he passed the workmen, thinking that in Moscow, in October of the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and thirty-six, it was best not to comment on such things, particularly not if one had a hangover.

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Korolev was a man of well above average height, at least according to the norms published by the Ministry of Health the week before, standing close to six foot tall. He was also above

the average weight for a Soviet citizen, but this he put down to his height and certainly not overeating, as if such a thing were possible in this period of transition to full Communism. Anyway, being his size had its advantages when a little muscle was needed.

He looked like what he was, a Militia detective of considerable experience. It probably didn't help that he had a solid face, the kind that policemen often had, with a broad jaw and wide cheekbones and skin raw from years in the sun and the snow. Even the short brown hair clinging to his scalp like dead grass marked him out as a cop. Curiously, however, the thick ribbon of a scar that ran from his left ear to the tip of his chin, a souvenir of an encounter with a White Cossack during the Civil War, made him seem more genial than ferocious, and his eyes, kind and warily amused, saved him from looking like a bruiser. For some reason those eyes made citizens consider Korolev a good sort, even if he happened to be arresting them, and more often than not they found themselves disclosing thoughts and information to him they'd really have preferred not to. But the eyes were misleading; Korolev had fought his way from the Ukraine to Siberia and back again for seven long years, against Germans, Austrians, Poles and anyone else who pointed a gun in his direction, and come through all of it more or less intact. When necessary, Captain Alexei Dmitriyevich Korolev wasn't soft – on the contrary.

Korolev scratched his neck as he mounted the stairs towards the second floor and considered what the removal of Commissar Yagoda's statue might mean for the Moscow Criminal Investigation Division. Up until now the Workers' and Peasants' Militia, to give the Soviet Union's regular police force its full title, included among its responsibilities maintaining public order, directing traffic, guarding important buildings, and sundry other tasks, not least of which was, of course, the investigation and prevention of criminal activity – which was where he and the rest of Moscow CID came in. Most of the political work was left to the NKVD –

State Security – although, when you lived in a worker state, almost everything was political to some extent. In some people's eyes, any crime was an attack on the entire socialist system, but the distinction between traditional crimes and political crimes still remained, for the moment at least. Of course, the Militia uniforms often helped the NKVD with political matters – even the Red Army did that from time to time – but generally Korolev and the other Militia detectives had been left to do what they were best at, which was tracking down and catching the perpetrators of serious crimes that did not stray into the political realm. As a result, when a Muscovite referred to 38 Petrovka Street, the home of Moscow CID, it was in the same way a Londoner might refer to Scotland Yard, and was completely different from how they might speak of the Lubianka, if they even dared mention the feared headquarters of the NKVD. Korolev hoped the positive perception of Petrovka Street would persist in these times of change.

The awkward truth of the matter, however, was that now the Militia, and therefore Moscow CID, formed part of the Ministry of State Security, and when these days citizens referred to the 'Organs' – the Organs of State Security – they meant both the NKVD and the Militia, and everyone knew the Militia's role might well be changed to a more political one by the new commissar, Ezhov. What was more, judging from his statue's removal, Ezhov's predecessor's arrest might well be imminent, if it hadn't happened already. And if that happened, then a purge of the Organs would be likely to follow. Korolev knew the pattern by now – he had one of the highest detection rates in the department but no one would be safe if there was a purge. He'd seen too much in the last few years to be in any doubt of that.

Korolev entered Room 2F with a greeting that was closer to a grunt than a pleasantry, turned towards the coat hooks on the back of the door and began to manoeuvre himself out of his winter coat, which was tighter across the shoulders than was comfortable since he'd last worn it six months before. The room

was painted battleship grey and furnished with four desks, two facing two, and eight filing cabinets that lined the walls. It smelt of men and cigarettes, and the light that streamed in through the window struggled against the smoke that the three other investigators already present were furiously producing. For decoration the walls had a functional map of Moscow and a portrait of Stalin. Up until yesterday there had also been a photograph of Commissar Yagoda, but now there was only a square patch of lighter paint. That fact alone was enough to make anyone light up a cigarette.

Korolev finally succeeded in peeling the coat from his body, revealing his seldom-worn uniform. He turned and found he had the complete attention of his colleagues' pale faces and round eyes. Three cigarette ends flared as one as they regarded him. Korolev shrugged, noticing that his uniform was also tighter since the last time he'd worn it, and nodded to them.

'Good morning, Comrades,' he said, once again, but this time more distinctly. Larinin recovered first.

'What time is this to come to work, Comrade? It's well past nine o'clock. It's not what the Party expects. It's my duty to raise it at the Works Council.'

Larinin looked like a pig in Korolev's opinion, and the chipped and broken grey teeth that snarled between his fleshy lips looked like a pig's teeth. His voice was higher than usual today, however, and Korolev noticed how the podgy fingers that held his cigarette were shaking slightly. He's rattled, Korolev thought, looking at him, and wasn't surprised. He was always careful of the bald investigator with the belly that spilled over the desk like a tidal wave, but today he'd be especially careful. The hammer blows still echoing up the stairwell might mark the end for a political man like Larinin. The desk, after all, had belonged to Knuckles Mendeleyev until a short time before, and Larinin had won no friends with the way he'd gained it. Mendeleyev had been a hard and effective investigator who'd been the scourge of the Moscow Thieves until Larinin, a traffic policeman, had denounced him

for spreading anti-Soviet propaganda. Now Larinin sat amongst Mendeleyev's former colleagues, filling Knuckles' space, if not his shoes, while no one knew for certain where Knuckles had gone except that it was probably somewhere in the far north and against his will and all because of a stupid joke about the Chekists that the traffic policeman had overheard and exploited. So it was no wonder that Larinin looked nervous, knowing as he did how quickly the wind could shift these days, and conscious that after three weeks sitting amongst them he had not resolved a single case. It was hardly an achievement to boast of to his Party friends.

'I know what time it is, Grigoriy Denisovich,' Korolev said. 'I had to visit Staff Colonel Gregorin at the Lubianka. He kept me waiting. Would you like me to give you his telephone number so that you can check?'

Looking down, he noticed that moths had been at his sleeve over the summer. He rubbed the chewed fabric and sat down at his desk, placing his fur hat in the bottom drawer where it belonged. He turned on his reading light and began to look through the papers in the file he was due to forward to the procurator's office later that day, but paused as he became aware of the strange silence that had fallen over the room.

'Comrades?' Korolev asked, looking up. The other investigators were staring at him in open-mouthed fascination, a mixture of terror and pity on their faces. Larinin was wiping sweat from his hairless scalp with his shirt sleeve.

'The Lubianka, Alexei Dmitriyevich?' Junior Lieutenant Ivan Ivanovich Semionov said. Semionov was the youngest of the investigators, only twenty-two, although sometimes, as now, he seemed even younger. He resembled a Komsomol poster boy with his floppy blond hair, almost feminine good looks and straightforward demeanour. Semionov had only been with them for two months – most of it spent assisting Korolev with simple tasks and learning the ropes – and had yet to learn when not to say what was on his mind.

'Yes, Ivan Ivanovich,' Korolev replied. 'Comrade Gregorin wants me to give a lecture to the final-year cadets at the NKVD Higher School.'

The three men relaxed. Larinin's pasty face seemed suddenly a little less pasty, Semionov smiled and Dmitry Alexandrovich Yasimov, a wiry fellow of Korolev's age with a professor's face and a cynical wit, leant back in his chair, wincing as the movement stretched a stomach wound, and pulled at the end of his thin, barbered moustache.

'So, Lyoshka, *that's* why you're wearing the uniform. I suppose we thought there might be some other reason. It's rare to see you in one.' Yasimov used the familiar form of Korolev's name, as was his right after twelve years of working and drinking with him. Korolev looked at the chewed sleeve and scowled. It was true; he preferred to wear civilian clothes. Nothing stopped a citizen confiding in an investigator more surely than a brown uniform, in his opinion at least.

'It needed an outing, mind you. Look at this – the damned moths have been at it.'

'And it looks a little tighter now. Putting on weight, are you?' Yasimov's eyes twinkled and Korolev smiled, the old sabre scar that ran along his jaw drawing his left eye to the side and giving him a dreamy look, accentuated by the way his eyes lurked indistinctly under his thick eyebrows. Yasimov would joke that Korolev's eyes seemed always to be focused on his dinner. But Korolev, while acknowledging an element of truth in the assertion, thought that this dreamy quality made people trust him, and that was certainly useful in their line of work.

'Muscle, Dmitry. I've been in training. Keeps me sharp, stops old ladies from stabbing me.'

Semionov snorted behind a hastily opened file and Larinin forgot his troubles enough to laugh openly. Even Yasimov had to smile as he rubbed at the spot where an elderly woman had placed the business end of a pair of scissors when he'd tried to help her

across the street. It was the uniform, she'd told them later, and Korolev hadn't been surprised; uniforms made people nervous these days. She'd thought Yasimov was going to arrest her, even though she'd done nothing wrong, and Korolev had had to lift her gently by the arms to stop her puncturing Yasimov for a second time. Even the innocent were jumping at shadows these days, and she'd just happened to have a pair of scissors in her fist when she did so. Korolev tried not to laugh, but to get the better of his friend was such a rare event that he had to put his hand in front of his mouth. Yasimov shook his head in admonishment.

'Very funny. But yes, I'm following your example now, Lyoshka. Strictly plain clothes after that experience. Anyway, tell us, if you're passing on your wisdom to young Chekists, on what subject will you be exhibiting your pedagogical abilities?'

Korolev had found the file he was looking for and now it lay open in front of him; the perpetrator's arrest photograph staring up at him, bruises dark on his pale young face. It hadn't been a pleasant case, but still he felt his conscience shy at the sight of the man's battered features. Korolev hadn't been in the room when they'd roughed the youth up, and he couldn't really condemn the uniforms who'd done it – they each had sisters and daughters, after all. Nonetheless, punishment was best left to the People's Courts – otherwise things would be no better than before the Revolution.

Distracted by the photograph, he wasn't really paying attention to Yasimov and when he looked up he cursed under his breath, half-smiling, seeing that Semionov and even Larinin had warmed to the game.

'Come on, Comrade,' Yasimov said, 'it's a great honour. You must share the news with your fellow workers. In what area of expertise are you so pre-eminent that a staff colonel should have picked you, an ageing captain in Moscow CID, to address the bright young Chekists of the F. E. Dzerzhinsky Higher School of

State Security? The cream of Soviet youth, no less. Even our boy hero here wouldn't get a look in with that lot.'

He nodded his head towards Semionov, who smiled good-naturedly. The three of them waited for Korolev's answer, knowing it already.

'Case file management, you rat,' Korolev said in a rush, unable to stop a smile at his own expense. He was rewarded with a burst of laughter from the other three men.

'A worthy topic, Alexei,' Yasimov said, pleased that the natural order of things had been re-established. 'The little Chekists will learn a thing or two from an old hand like you.'

'I hope so, Dimka, although I'm surprised they didn't think to ask you to give a lecture on self-defence.'

Yasimov wagged a warning finger at Korolev, who was somewhat surprised himself to score off his friend twice in the same morning. Semionov was coughing behind his file and Larinin was looking for something in his bottom drawer, shoulders heaving. Yasimov was about to respond when a loud crash echoed up the stairwell. It sounded like a former General Commissar of State Security's statue collapsing to the floor and breaking into several pieces, blankets notwithstanding. In the silence that followed the four of them looked at each other. The noise was a reminder, particularly to Larinin, that now was the time for results, not for idle laughter. Soon the only sounds in the room were the rustle of pages being turned in case files and the scratch of Soviet-made nibs against Soviet-made paper. Comrade Stalin looked down on them with approval.

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It was Korolev's habit to review every page of his case file before it went to the procurator's office. On the one hand, the purpose of the exercise was to ensure the file contained everything the procurator's office needed to ensure a successful conviction,

but Korolev also performed the task to see if he could identify anything he'd missed in the course of the investigation that, with hindsight, might have brought the matter to a close sooner. It was a practice that often yielded interesting results and was never entirely a waste of time. Sometimes Korolev found patterns of behaviour repeating themselves that he found intriguing and stored away for future reference. Now, as he looked at the student Voroshilov's photograph, Korolev wondered whether the rapist would ever have committed his crimes if he'd stayed in the small town near Smolensk where he'd grown up. Obviously, he must have had an inclination towards this kind of violence, but, perhaps, if he hadn't been sent to study in Moscow, he might have settled down, married a nice girl and contributed usefully to society. Instead, when he'd been accepted at one of the new Moscow engineering academies, he'd discovered the anonymity, and opportunity, at the heart of a Soviet city in transition, where people, buildings and even entire neighbourhoods were in a constant state of flux. Workers coming and going, factories opening, new construction projects: the development of Moscow into a capital worthy of the great Soviet Revolution had given young Voroshilov the space and opportunity to rape six young women over a four-week period, and he'd taken advantage.

It hadn't been reported in the newspapers and yet the word had spread. Moscow was a dangerous city at the best of times – long hours, short rations and vodka were a combustible mix – but a violent rapist striking again and again in rapid succession was unusual. Women had been careful walking alone at night, especially in the streets that had no lighting, but still Voroshilov had found opportunities. After the first one, he'd explained when he was arrested, the forced possession of women had become the only thing he thought of. With each attack the violence increased and it was only a matter of luck he hadn't killed someone. Korolev turned a page and came across a photograph of the bruised and bloodied Maria Naumova with her four missing teeth, her twisted

nose and blackened eyes. Korolev wished he'd caught up with Voroshilov earlier, but sometimes to identify a criminal it was necessary for the dog to continue committing crimes. So he'd tracked him with a patient anger and extracted the information from each crime that had helped him slowly, but inevitably, bring the rapist to justice.

The first victim came from a town not forty kilometres from where Voroshilov had grown up and had recognized his accent. The second remembered his new knee-length leather boots – an almost astonishing fact in itself for a student, Korolev thought ruefully, moving a toe about inside one of his own battered boots and wondering if they'd last the winter. The third girl had seen enough of the rapist's face to give a good description of him, and one which turned out to be more accurate than most. The fourth victim, Masha Naumova, had barely remembered her own name by the time Voroshilov had finished with her, but the fifth had snatched a piece of paper from his pocket as he'd pressed down on her in a patch of waste ground near the Moskva. She'd rolled it up in her fist and hidden it beneath her. It was a list of lectures. But it had taken them a day to identify the academy he was studying at – time that allowed Voroshilov to attack his sixth and final victim.

They'd been waiting for him when he returned to the student hostel where he shared a tiny cubicle with three other young men. A youth like any other, it seemed to Korolev when he saw him, except for the blood-dotted scratch that ran down his cheek. He hadn't resisted and, when they'd taken him away in the black police car, he'd seemed more relieved than frightened. The Militiamen at the local station had scuffed their knuckles on him and then thrown him into a holding cell with a bunch of Thieves. By the time the morning came, Voroshilov had an idea of just how unpleasant ten years' hard labour could be for a rapist, and the beginning of an understanding of what the Thieves did to 'furry burglars' when they fell into their hands.

Korolev closed the file and wrote a brief summary in his elegant handwriting. A priest's hand, his mother had used to say proudly, dizzy at the possibility of young Korolev entering the tsarist bureaucracy, or perhaps even the Church itself. But then the German War had come and he'd enlisted and, when the Germans and Austrians were finished with, the Civil War had begun and so he'd fought the Whites, and then finally the Poles. By the time he'd made it home, his mother was dead and clerical jobs were few and far between in the new order. How could his poor mother have imagined that, twenty years on, all that would be left of the old regime would be a few well-mannered scarecrows scratching a living off what little manual work they could find, and selling the last of their possessions for food in the currency shops? And that there would be only a handful of churches still open in a city that had had one on every corner? He finished the note and took a stamp from the cluster that stood together on the windowsill. He marked the cover *For Attention of Moscow Procurator's Office* with satisfaction, and was thankful for the opportunity to contribute usefully to the creation of this new society, hard though the process was.

'A job well done, Alexei,' Yasimov said, for once not joking.

'He's Kolyma-bound for sure,' Korolev said, tucking the folder under his arm as he stood up.

'He won't last long there,' Larinin said, emboldened by the earlier laughter. 'The Thieves will have him at the train station. The burglar will be burgled before he even gets to the Zone.'

Waves of laughter rolled up his shirt front and his stomach heaved itself up a few inches onto the desk. His eyes, half hidden by fat at the best of times, were now mere slits of skin from which he wiped away tears, not noticing that the others didn't join in. Yasimov turned away with a frown and even Semionov looked as if he'd eaten something unpleasant. Korolev wondered how many years they'd given Knuckles on Larinin's evidence, and what the Thieves did to ex-Militiamen in the Zone. He left the room

quickly, his fingers longing to squeeze Larinin's throat until it popped.

Outside on the landing Korolev took a long deep breath and heard the laughter come to a stop, then Larinin's uncertain voice asking was it not amusing that the rapist would be raped? He received no response. What *would* the Thieves do to a cop like Knuckles? You never knew. Their sense of honour was strange. And Knuckles had been fair in his own way. He might have a chance.

There was no answer when he knocked on the general's door, but he opened it anyway – being familiar with his boss's ways. Popov was looking out at the passing traffic – his back to the room and his massive shoulders filling the window, his three-quarter length leather jacket reflecting the sunshine.

'Comrade General,' Korolev said, holding himself at attention. There was something about General Popov that encouraged his men to behave like tsarist guardsmen.

'Does no one knock in this damned place any more?' the general growled, without turning.

'My apologies, Comrade General. I did knock, but perhaps not hard enough.'

After a lengthy pause, General Popov turned to examine Korolev, picking up his spectacles from the table to do so more closely. Even with his glasses on, he still looked every inch the Soviet hero, handsome as a statue and with hair and eyes as black as coal. Seeing that Korolev was the previously blurred figure in front of him, his chiselled features softened into a smile.

'Alexei Dmitriyevich, is it? Come to shut down the Voroshilov file? That rat. Ten years, would you say? If I'd my way . . .'

But the general knew Korolev was familiar with his preference for summary criminal justice and so made do with slapping a hand onto his desk with some force.

'On his way to Siberia soon enough, I expect, General.'

'He won't see the spring. The Thieves give fellows like him a

taste of their own medicine. They don't last long.' The general smiled at the thought. 'Enough talk of that wretch. Sit, Alexei, and listen for a moment. I've some news.' The general took the file from Korolev and signed it quickly beneath Korolev's note. 'You did a good job here. An excellent job. Not the first time, of course. I give you all the hard cases, the crimes that look like they've been committed by ghosts, and yet you always find the devils and bring them to me. The highest conviction rate in the division and you don't even beat the confessions out of them.'

The general paused for a moment to look at Korolev with a hint of reproach, his unruly eyebrows drawing together in a frown as he considered the investigator's suspiciously liberal methods.

'I do my best, Comrade General,' said Korolev, and Popov sighed in response.

'And your best is very good. You're a terrier. Isn't that what the Thieves call us? Terriers? It describes you, you know. Once you're on the trail the bandit might as well hold out his wrists for cuffing. And excellent performance deserves recognition and reward. Comrade Stalin himself has made this clear, time and time again, and the General Secretary knows a thing or two about life. So I've had a word with Comrade Kurilova over at housing and asked her if she could find me something for my best man. I can't have you sharing a room with your cousin out in the back of beyond for ever, can I? I want you close at hand for when I need you. And in a way, as Comrade Stalin wants the best workers rewarded, I've no choice in the matter.'

Korolev found himself beginning to hope. Ever since his divorce two years before he'd been living with Mikhail, two tram rides and a long walk from Petrovka Street. He liked his cousin, but he wished he lived a little closer and drank a little less.

'Thank you, Comrade General. I'm grateful for your efforts on my behalf.'

'Efforts? I did better than efforts. She called me this morning

and said that for the man who caught the filthy rapist Voroshilov – and how she knew about him, I don't know, but that woman knows when a sparrow farts on the Lenin Hills, I'm sure of it. Still, it worked in your favour – for the man who felt Voroshilov's collar nothing less than a big room on Bolshoi Nikolo-Vorobinsky would do. Fourteen square metres. Some furniture as well. Here.'

The general pushed across a requisition form from the housing department signed by the sainted Kurilova. Korolev took it from him, feeling his face grow warm. Forty-two years old and still he blushed. He was glad Yasimov wasn't there to see it.

'I was only doing my duty, Comrade General,' he began, but the general interrupted him.

'Enough. It's a shared apartment, so don't get too excited. But you'll have your own room and as for the area – well, Kitaj-Gorod is not to be sneezed at. Full of VIPs and Party cadres. It'll do them good to see a real worker for a change.'

The general smiled at Korolev's discomfort.

'Don't worry, Alexei, I don't talk this way in front of Larinin and his like. Not that Larinin won't be back directing traffic on Tverskaya soon enough if he doesn't get off his backside and catch a criminal. We've quotas here, same as everywhere else, and he's not pulling his weight. Anyway, best get over there before they change their mind – the head of the building management committee has the keys. And as soon as you've finished, call in. There's been a murder over on Razin Street; it sounds like the work of a maniac – just your kind of thing. I'm going over to take a look.'

Korolev got to his feet so quickly that for a fraction of a second he felt dizzy.

'Comrade General,' he began and he could feel the gratitude making him pompous, but the general shook his head almost shyly, took Korolev's hand in a firm grip and held it for a moment or two while he regarded his subordinate with affection. Then his

face became grave again, as befitted a Soviet leader of men, and he turned away towards the window, his voice rough when he spoke.

'I said enough, Comrade, no need for a speech. Go on, quickly now – get your belongings moved in. You deserve it. Hurry, before I change *my* mind.'

And in this way, Alexei Dmitriyevich Korolev acquired an apartment on the street of Great Nicholas and the Sparrows.