

WILLIAM RYAN

THE TWELFTH
DEPARTMENT



MANTLE

Characters

Dr Irina Azarova – Professor Azarov’s wife

Isaac Babel – famous author and also Korolev’s neighbour

Sergeant Belinsky – Militiaman in charge of the investigating uniforms (uniformed police) at Leadership House

Blanter – State Security operative working for the NKVD’s Twelfth Department

Dr Zinaida Petrovna Chestnova – pathologist and friend of Korolev

Danilov – foreman in charge of the removals at the Azarov Institute

The Deacon – one of Count Kolya’s men

Dubinkin – a lieutenant with the NKVD

Nikolai Ezhov – General Commissar of State Security and head of the NKVD

Monsieur Hubert – a representative of the French embassy in Moscow

Count Kolya – leader of the Moscow Thieves

Captain Alexei Korolev – a detective with the Moscow Criminal Investigation Division

Yuri Korolev – Captain Korolev’s son

Valentina Nikolayevna Koltsova – Korolev’s friend and neighbour

Natasha Koltsova – Valentina Koltsova’s daughter
Kuznetsky – Militiaman assisting Korolev
Levshinsky – forensics specialist for Moscow CID
Lilova – maid to Dr Shtange
Maria Lobkovskaya – Korolev’s elderly downstairs neighbour
Galina Matkina – maid to Professor Azarov
Menchikova – resident of Leadership House
Mishka – Count Kolya’s right-hand man
Pavel Morozov – responsible for the car pool at Militia headquarters
and a friend of Korolev
Petya the Persuader – an informant
First Inspector Popov – Korolev’s boss
Priudsky – original doorman at Leadership House
Colonel Rodinov – a senior NKVD officer
Semyon Shabalin – a bank robber and gangster
Dr Arkady Shtange – Deputy Director of the Azarov Institute
Anna Shtange – Dr Shtange’s wife
Shura – maid to Babel and a friend to Korolev
Nadezhda Slivka – a junior detective with the Odessa CID
Spinsky – Director of the Vitsin Street Orphanage
Svalov – State Security operative working for the NKVD’s Twelfth
Department
Tambova – also known as ‘Little Barrel’, attendant at the Vitsin Street
Orphanage
Timinov – replacement doorman at Leadership House
Sergei Ushakov – forensics specialist for Moscow CID
Vera – Valentina’s friend and a worker at Moscow Zoo

Dr Weiss – neighbour and colleague of Professor Azarov

Captain Dmitry Yasimov – Korolev's fellow detective with Moscow
CID

Colonel Zaitsev – head of the NKVD's Twelfth Department

Prologue

PATRIARCH'S PONDS was one of Korolev's favourite corners of Moscow – a small park with a square-shaped lake around which, especially on a hot summer's day like this, white-shirted men and their befrooked womenfolk strolled with slow steps. At the southern end a white colonnaded pavilion stood where, for a reasonable price, a citizen could sip a glass of tea and sit and watch the ducks. Alternatively, in the eastern corner of the park, there stood a wooden kiosk where beer and kvass could be purchased and, if you knew how to ask for them, stronger beverages as well. If they'd had time to spare and a less pressing matter to attend to, Korolev thought to himself, a sip of vodka mightn't have been such a bad idea. But not today and not now. Not with a certain gangster he'd been after for six months about to walk into a trap of Korolev's making.

Anyway, he decided, he'd need all his wits about him. Semyon Shabalin was as slippery as an eel dipped in oil, and clever with it. Korolev and his comrades had managed to catch up with most of his Grey Fox gang and put them where they belonged – but Shabalin had wriggled free each time they'd thought they had him, even when escape had seemed an impossibility. And while most of Moscow's underworld had certain standards – which, it had to be said, they often seemed to forget about – the Grey Foxes had none. With each robbery they'd committed, they'd set new standards in brutality and

WILLIAM RYAN

viciousness – so that now even the Thieves, the organized clans that ran crime in Moscow, were shaking their heads in disapproval. Whatever else happened today, Korolev was determined Shabalin wasn't leaving this park a free man.

Korolev walked outside the park's railings while Petya the Persuader, their informant, followed the tree-covered path that ran alongside the sky-reflecting blue water. Slivka was a few paces behind Petya, wearing a pretty white dress, her short blonde hair looking almost golden in the dappled sunlight. Her lips might be a little thin and her expression grave, but she was a good-looking woman and he watched men's heads turn one after the other to follow her procession through the park. He wondered if they'd be so keen if they knew the hand nonchalantly resting inside her open purse was wrapped around the butt of a service-issue revolver.

Korolev glanced at his watch. If Petya was to be believed, Shabalin would meet him on the fourth bench to the left of the pavilion – in just a few minutes' time. He adjusted the ticket machine he had slung over his shoulder – part of his disguise as a tram conductor on a break – and found himself, to his surprise, wishing there was a sandwich in the tin lunchbox he was carrying – as opposed to his Walther.

Korolev kept his eyes moving – examining each of the pedestrians who passed him, watching for anyone or anything that seemed out of place. If things went as he hoped, there'd be a small scuffle and Shabalin would be in the bag. If things didn't go to plan? Well, if he had to shoot Shabalin's legs from him, then so be it.

Korolev took a seat beside an elderly lady ten metres from the bench Petya now occupied. Slivka found herself a spot a little further along the path on Petya's other side and, two minutes later, a familiar-looking balloon seller began hawking his wares in their general vicinity. From where Korolev was sitting, Yasimov's disguise looked less than convincing – it seemed one end

THE TWELFTH DEPARTMENT

of the detective's moustache was slightly higher than the other. But it was too late to do anything about that now.

Korolev sighed, took his newspaper from the pocket of his coat and opened it, scanning his surroundings one more time as he did so. All was peaceful – a toy sailing boat moved slowly across the water, leaving a v-shaped wake behind it, the only disturbance on the pond's surface. It was a sweltering afternoon and the heat seemed to be pressing down on everything – making even the noises of the city that surrounded them seem distant. He found himself yawning as he opened the latch on the lunchbox so that his Walther would be easily accessible. It wasn't much good having a gun if you couldn't get to it quickly. The toy yacht moved onwards and Korolev had no idea where it was picking up a breeze from. He could feel nothing – just the remorseless weight of the heat. It occurred to him that if he couldn't have a sandwich, then an ice cream would be just the thing on a day like this.

He yawned again. He could feel his eyes growing heavy and put a hand to his ear to twist it – hard. The pain woke him up a little – just as a gaggle of *besprizorniki* came ambling into the park and caught his attention. Most of the street children were barefoot and wearing nothing but short trousers, their shirts tucked into belts or slung over their bare shoulders – skin dark as oiled wood from the long summer. They walked with chests out and shoulders back and it seemed that if they didn't own the place, then no one had told them.

Korolev didn't like the look of them – the thing was, they looked in the mood for wickedness, staring impudently into the faces of the citizens they passed and sharing jokes amongst themselves that seemed to have more than a hint of malice about them. They were out for trouble, no doubt about it. And, in a moment of complete clarity, Korolev realized that the target they'd choose for their mischief would inevitably be the odd-looking balloon seller with the unbalanced moustache.

WILLIAM RYAN

‘Twenty kopecks for a big red balloon,’ Yasimov called out and his voice sounded like the sad bleat of a lambless sheep. The *besprizorniki* turned as one, like hounds catching a scent. And, without anyone needing to say a word, they fanned out around the unhappy detective.

‘Twenty kopecks? Twenty? For a balloon that you filled with your own gas?’

This from the leader – a ratty-looking rascal and one Korolev didn’t doubt would be a long-standing future acquaintance of the Moscow Militia.

‘Get lost, puppy, or you’ll feel the toe of my boot,’ Yasimov said, whipping around as another of the youngsters pulled at the striped sailor’s shirt he’d thought, for some unknown reason, would make him look the part.

‘Two for ten would be more like it, damned speculator.’

A stunted, dark-haired boy, this one, with a prematurely lined forehead and a nose that had been bent sideways somewhere along the way. A cigarette jutted out of the corner of his mouth and the runt blew a cloud of smoke up into Yasimov’s indignant face to make his point.

‘I’d say he’s more than a speculator, Comrades,’ their leader drawled. ‘I’d say he’s an enemy. He’s got that look about him.’

‘Get out of here, fleas, or you’ll regret waking up this morning.’

That was when the first balloon popped – the runt stabbing it with a glowing cigarette end. And simultaneously, as if the balloon had been a signal, from further down the pathway came a rapid series of explosions not unlike machine-gun fire, as a separate group of children let off a belt of firecrackers.

From complete calm, the scene around him had changed in an instant to chaos, but strangely Korolev found that for him everything was slowing down. This turmoil was no damned coincidence, he was thinking. It was a diversion, or he was a Bolshoi ballerina.

THE TWELFTH DEPARTMENT

Where was Shabalin?

Once he looked, it wasn't hard to find him – he'd already climbed over the park railings not twenty metres behind him. And once inside the park, Shabalin was heading for Petya at a brisk walk, one hand in his pocket. And Korolev was pretty sure it wasn't a comb that Shabalin was holding in there.

Petya saw Shabalin and the big man jumped to his feet, lifting his hands up to fend him off. Korolev was running now and, just as the silver flash of Shabalin's blade began to slice towards Petya's chest, he found that he'd swung the solid weight of the ticket machine on its leather strap over his head and down towards Shabalin's shoulder, where it hit with a solid blow, knocking the arm down just before the knife connected – and sending it skittering away across the path.

'You damned traitor, Petya,' Shabalin cried out as he ducked, clutching his shoulder and twisting himself out of Korolev's attempt to hold him.

'Stay where you are, Shabalin,' Korolev shouted, but the gang leader was already two steps away and moving along the pathway fast. Yasimov's whistle was shrieking somewhere close and someone was shouting for the police.

'Stop,' Korolev called out. 'Or I shoot.'

Shabalin turned to look back and so never saw the white dress coming towards him like an express train. Slivka drove her right shoulder into the killer's midriff – every ounce of her weight behind it – and Shabalin hit the ground like lead, his head bouncing off the tarmac path. He lay where he fell, completely still – a bundle of clothes and limbs – while Slivka scrambled to her knees, turned him and handcuffed his arms behind his back.

'Sit down,' Yasimov was shouting and Korolev turned to see Petya slump back onto the bench, putting his hands on his head – a penitent look on his face. Balloons were floating through the branches above, while the last of the *besprizorniki* were scattering as uniforms flooded into the park.

WILLIAM RYAN

‘Good work, Comrades,’ Korolev said, kneeling down to examine the unconscious Shabalin. It seemed it was all over – the battle was won. He put his hand to the gangster’s neck, feeling for a pulse – relieved to find one. In the circumstances, the fact that no one had been killed seemed a miracle.

Korolev took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, offering one to Slivka and lighting one for himself. It was just coming up to four o’clock – plenty of time to make it to the station. And what happier omen could there be for young Yuri’s visit to Moscow than to have put Semyon Shabalin behind bars?

Chapter One

YAROSLAVSKY STATION was crowded and unpleasant – but Korolev breathed in the hot, muggy air and allowed himself a smile. What did it matter, when Yuri, his 12-year-old son, would be stepping down from the Zagorsk train in a matter of minutes?

It *was* hot though. Even in the relative cool of the ticket hall, Korolev could feel sweat pooling under his arms and running down his back in what seemed to be a constant stream – but he still couldn't help the joy bubbling up through him. Anyway, it couldn't stay this hot for much longer – the weather would turn more comfortable in the next few days. It had to.

Ideally, he'd take off his jacket, which felt heavy as a fur coat in this heat. But if he did take it off then he'd have every citizen in the place looking at the Walther in its holster and wondering if he was a Chekist come to arrest somebody – and whether that somebody might just be them. He could do without that kind of attention.

He just hoped that the train would be on time – or at least not too late.

There was one niggling concern at the back of his mind about this visit though, and that was its unexpectedness – it had come completely out of the blue. His ex-wife Zhenia had called him just a few days before to ask if he could take Yuri – she hadn't explained why and he hadn't asked. At the time, it had

WILLIAM RYAN

been enough for him that he'd be seeing the boy for a whole week – just the two of them. But afterwards, when he'd thought it through, he couldn't help but have a more complex reaction to the news. After all, he'd loved Zhenia back when they'd still been man and wife – and love left its mark on a man's soul and that was all there was to it. And even if it wasn't any of his business what Zhenia was up to, he couldn't help but feel a little low at the thought that, likely as not, she'd be spending a week with some other member of the male species, and in a place where their son wouldn't be welcome. He bore her no ill will, of course, and she was within her rights – but still.

His thoughts were diverted from their glum turn by two shrill blasts of a whistle from somewhere far down the tracks and, as if in response, the station speakers announced the arrival of the Zagorsk train. Not a minute passed before it came into view, steam billowing out behind and around it – eventually coming to a halt just short of the buffers with a loud grinding of brakes. In no time at all, the empty platform was full of passengers and a surge of baggage and humanity flooded towards him.

Korolev took up position just beside the engine's coal tender, keeping his eyes peeled for a mop of blonde hair and a smiling face, hardly able to contain his own excitement – but there was no sign of Yuri. The people kept coming but still his son didn't appear, and now he was looking only at stragglers and railway workers. Where was he? There'd been youngsters amongst the crowd right enough, but they'd had parents and family in tow. Zhenia had sent the boy on his own, saying he'd be fine, that the journey wasn't very long; but Korolev knew things he'd never tell Zhenia about what could happen on a Soviet train – even in the middle of the day with the sun shining. He found his hands had balled into fists and that dread was seeping through his veins.

Korolev moved forward along the length of train, his pace

THE TWELFTH DEPARTMENT

increasing with each step, checking each compartment and pushing aside anyone who got in his way. By the time he'd reached the fourth carriage he was almost certain something had happened to the boy. And by the time he'd checked the fifth carriage, and found it empty as well, he was convinced of it. It wasn't until the very last carriage – by which time guards were shutting doors further up the train – that he found what he'd been looking for. A small head. Blonde hair pressed against a window.

Korolev swallowed hard and opened the door, fearing the worst. The young boy sat slumped in the corner of a bench seat, a suitcase on his knees nearly as big as he was. Deathly pale, his eyes shut. Yuri. Korolev reached forward to touch his son's cheek, bracing himself; but the skin was warm. Korolev hadn't even been aware he was holding his breath until he let it go.

The boy was fast asleep.

Korolev took the seat opposite, not sure quite what to do. Should he wake him? He examined him – a little over five feet tall now, he'd say – a good-looking child with a strong mouth and a firm chin. His hair was cut short at the sides but had a little length on top so his curls showed. Around his neck, above the white sleeveless shirt, hung a red Pioneer's scarf – the brass ring that gathered it together underneath the boy's chin looking as though it had been polished for the trip.

He'd changed was the truth of the matter, his face was leaner and he'd grown an inch or two, but it was more than that. It seemed to Korolev almost as if he was looking at a version of the son he remembered. He'd only seen Yuri once in two years, for three days back in March, and even then they'd only been together in the evenings. Of course, he would have changed – he was young, it was what they did. Only middle-aged men like him stayed more or less the same.

Eventually he leant forward and shook Yuri's shoulder till his blue eyes opened in surprise. The boy shifted his focus

WILLIAM RYAN

rapidly from Korolev to the carriage, to the station he found himself in – sitting up as he did so.

Korolev heard him murmur a single word – ‘Moscow’ – before he leant back against the seat.

‘Yuri,’ Korolev said, softly, and expected to see the boy’s face break into a smile, for the suitcase to be tossed aside and for arms to reach around his neck, but instead his son’s expression remained melancholy, and he said nothing. Korolev leant forward once again to ruffle the boy’s hair – careful to be gentle with him.

‘Are you all right?’

Yuri nodded but it seemed to be an effort for him. Korolev looked at him for a long moment – there was something not right, that was certain. But like as not, tiredness was mostly what it was – that and the heat. He took the bag from the boy’s unresisting grip then slipped his arm around him.

‘Come here, Yurochka,’ he said and scooped the boy up to his shoulder, turning to climb down from the carriage and place Yuri on his unsteady feet.

‘We’ll have to walk for a while, can you manage?’

The boy nodded.

‘I’ll carry the suitcase then.’

They made their way along the platform in silence, Yuri’s eyes fixed on the ground in front of his feet, not once looking up at him. And Korolev felt almost as lost as the boy looked.

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They travelled by tram back to Bolshoi Nikolo-Vorobinsky. Korolev managed to squeeze Yuri onto a seat and stood over him, protecting the boy from the late-afternoon crush. Yuri didn’t look at him or the other passengers, or even out the window at the city passing by. His stare was blank and seemed fixed on nothing. Korolev felt his hand instinctively reach forward to touch him, but he held it back. He’d take it slowly –

THE TWELFTH DEPARTMENT

there was time. They needed to get to know each other again was all.

It was only five minutes from the tram stop to the street Korolev lived in, but Yuri still hadn't spoken – or even properly acknowledged him. Korolev stopped at the door to the apartment and crouched down in front of Yuri so that the boy couldn't avoid looking at him. Even in the gloom of the stairwell, the boy's blue eyes seemed unnaturally bright.

'Listen, Yuri. I know you're tired, I can see that, but these are your neighbours for the next week and you'll make an effort, yes? The woman is called Koltsova – Valentina Nikolayevna.' Korolev spoke distinctly – until the boy was better acquainted, it would be polite for him to use both Valentina's name and patronymic. Yuri nodded to show he had it memorized.

'Her husband was that famous engineer I told you about, the one who died in the Metro accident.'

'I remember.' Yuri's voice, when it came, was little better than a croak.

'Good. Now her daughter is Natasha – she's a bit younger than you and a good person as well. A Pioneer, same as you are. They're the best of people, both of them – I couldn't ask for better. So I want you to speak up and speak strongly, as Comrade Stalin would expect from such a fine young specimen of socialist youth, and treat them as the good comrades they are.'

Yuri seemed to wake at that, and give Korolev his full attention for the first time.

'Of course.'

'Good.'

Korolev stood and put his key in the lock, knocking once on the door as he opened it.

'We're here,' he called in.

'Come in, come in,' Valentina bustled out from the small kitchen area, wiping her hands on an apron, her cheeks rosy

WILLIAM RYAN

from the heat. It occurred to Korolev that he'd never seen her wear an apron before.

'We made a cake,' she said. 'We wanted to do something nice for Yuri.'

'An apricot cake,' Natasha said, appearing beside her mother, a smile on her face. 'I queued for them. The apricots that is.'

'We didn't get everything we needed,' Valentina put a finger to her chin as she considered this. 'But it worked out, I think.'

'It smells good.'

'It does smell good,' Yuri agreed, and Korolev was pleased to see his son was smiling along with everyone else.

'Yuri,' Valentina stepped forward to embrace him. 'We're pleased to have you here.'

'Thank you. I'm pleased to be here.'

Yuri looked up towards Korolev, who nodded his approval.

'Yes, Comrade Yuri – fellow Pioneer.' Natasha took Yuri's hand in hers, shaking it vigorously. 'Welcome to Moscow.'

Chapter Two

IT WAS STRANGE to spend a night with another human being so close by – and periodically Korolev found himself waking, just about, and listening – though for what, he couldn't quite remember at first. A dark silence surrounded him. Then, his ears attuning, he might hear a car's engine a few streets away, or perhaps some mysterious metallic grinding from down near the river, or a late-night walker's footsteps. Nothing unusual, in other words. It was like that, Moscow – it moved around in its sleep.

Finally, however, Korolev would detect the quiet rhythm of Yuri's breathing only feet away. The boy was sleeping on a borrowed couch on the other side of the bedroom and Korolev felt a warm happiness at his proximity. But even in his half-awake state, he remembered that all wasn't well. Yuri had cheered up when they'd come back to the apartment, but until then – well – he'd been strange and silent. And, remembering that, worry would gnaw away at Korolev – until he slipped back into unconsciousness once again.

How he found himself lying beside Valentina Nikolayevna, looking across at her sleeping face, he wasn't sure. Her hair was spread across the pillow like an angel's halo – never had she looked so beautiful. Her lips opened slightly as she stirred, the blanket slipping down from her bare neck, lower and lower. Then lower still . . .

WILLIAM RYAN

‘Papa?’

The voice was clear, very clear, but it didn’t fit – he decided to ignore it.

‘Papa?’

That voice again. He wished it would *go away*. If this was a dream then it was a damned good one – one he wanted to wrap tight around him like a blanket. Even now, as it seemed in danger of slipping away. But she was still there – just. Valentina, the woman with whom he shared his apartment – the woman he secretly admired. And now this perfect dream. It was hard to hold onto it, with that gentle tapping on his chest.

‘Papa?’

A boy’s voice – close enough for him to feel the breath against his cheek. If he shut his eyes very tightly it would go away, no doubt of it. The important thing was to stay asleep and hold onto the dream.

‘Papa, wake up.’

And it was gone. Such a dream, as well. He opened his eyes to find his son looking down at him, frowning.

‘Yuri?’ he said, rubbing his fingers over his eyes. ‘What time is it?’

Early, to judge by the flat sunlight coming through the curtains. He’d half-hoped to lounge in his bed for a change, but it seemed that wasn’t to be.

‘You were groaning.’

‘Was I?’ Korolev said, feeling his cheeks redden.

‘I thought you might be ill.’

‘No, just a dream.’

‘You were talking to yourself.’

Damn, he’d been talking to himself. What had he said?

‘What did I say?’ Korolev asked, deciding it was best he knew.

‘I couldn’t make it out. You sounded in pain, though.’

THE TWELFTH DEPARTMENT

‘Probably just a bad dream.’ Or a good one, of course. ‘How did you find the couch?’

‘Good, I think.’ Yuri looked unsure. ‘How did I end up in here?’

‘You fell asleep while you were eating so I brought you in.’

Yuri considered this.

‘I was tired from the journey.’

‘You were,’ Korolev said, pushing down the sheet and sitting up. He thought about that niggling worry of his and whether he should bring it up – and decided not to. There was time enough. He yawned and stretched his arms above his head. He should be fully awake for such a subject.

‘Let’s get some breakfast then, and plan our day.’

‘Mother said you might have to work.’ Yuri’s eyes slid sideways. ‘She said I shouldn’t expect to see much of you.’

Korolev sat on the side of the bed and regarded his son, smiling as he did so.

‘As it happens, I’ve your whole visit off. I need to go in to Petrovka and sign some papers this morning but that won’t take more than a few minutes. And I happen to know there’s a jazz band playing in Hermitage Park, which is just across the street – we can kill two birds with one stone.’

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By the time Korolev had done his morning exercises and they’d dressed, Valentina and Natasha were also up and about in the bedroom they occupied on the other side of the shared sitting room.

‘Good morning,’ Korolev said, the memory of his dream making him feel more than a little shifty in Valentina Nikolayevna’s presence.

‘Yurochka,’ Valentina said, embracing his son – the diminutive of Yuri’s name sounding surprisingly natural to Korolev,

WILLIAM RYAN

even though they'd only met the night before. 'You're awake. We were worried about you last night. You just fell forward – you'd have a bruise if your father hadn't caught you.'

Yuri gave her a shy smile.

'I thought it might have been the apricot cake,' Natasha said, gravely, coming into the room. 'I thought Mother might have poisoned you.'

Valentina reached out a swift hand as though to cuff her only child, who giggled as she danced away.

'I'll poison *you*, one of these days.'

'I thought the cake was very good,' Yuri said, 'I liked it very much.'

'At last, a polite child in the house.'

'Have you been to the zoo, Yuri?' Natasha asked, clambering onto the heavy wooden table in the shared room and sitting there in the morning light, her legs swinging. She was ten – a couple of years younger than Yuri – but if he hadn't known this to be the case, Korolev would have guessed she was the older of the two.

'Never.'

'You see, Mama. I told you. We have to take him. You must call your friend. If Yuri went back to Zagorsk without going to the greatest zoo in the world – well.'

It was clear that, in Natasha's opinion, this would be a source of bitter shame for everyone involved

'Can I come?' Korolev asked.

'If you're not working, of course you can,' Natasha said. 'But you work all the time. Which is good, of course. The State needs hard workers.'

'I have the next six days off.'

'Six days?' Valentina said, raising her eyebrows. 'Six days with no work at all?'

'I've got to sign some paperwork this morning – on the Grey Fox investigation. But apart from that – I'm free as a bird.'

THE TWELFTH DEPARTMENT

Yuri's eyes widened.

'The Grey Fox investigation?'

'A serious business – we captured the leader yesterday.'

'He was a murderer,' Natasha told Yuri, lowering her voice. 'And a bank robber. They called him "Needle" because he killed seven men with an ice pick.'

'A bank robber?' Yuri asked, looking to Korolev for confirmation.

'Only one bank. Mostly post offices and factory safes. A tough customer – we were glad to catch up with him. I'll tell you about it on the way to Petrovka, don't you worry.'

'You're taking Yuri to Petrovka?' Natasha asked. 'To Militia headquarters?'

'I wasn't going to,' Korolev said. 'But I could do that. Shura said she might come up with us – there's a concert in Hermitage Park. A jazz concert. I was going to drop Yuri and Shura off there, do my business, and join them later.'

Shura was maid to their famous neighbour, Babel the writer, and a maternal figure to many of the children in the building, as well as, strangely, Korolev. Natasha's face was a picture of longing and Korolev was detective enough to know it wasn't the concert she was interested in.

'Would you like to come as well?'

'To Petrovka? To visit the Moscow Criminal Investigation Division?' Natasha asked, doing her best to sound offhand – and failing. 'Yes, that could be interesting. Very interesting. Will there be criminals?'

'Probably, but I'll steer you clear of them,' Korolev said, looking to Valentina Nikolayevna – who looked amused.

'And afterwards, seeing as it's such hot weather, we could go swimming.'

'Swimming?' two young voices said in unison.

'All Pioneers have to be able to swim long and fast. I wouldn't want you falling behind in such a thing.'

WILLIAM RYAN

Yuri and Natasha agreed that this was something that should be avoided.

‘How about tomorrow morning for the zoo?’ Valentina asked, making her way towards the small kitchen. ‘I’ll call Vera. First thing?’

‘Vera works at the zoo,’ Natasha explained. ‘No one else is there in the morning, Yuri. We’ll see things no one else has ever seen. Animals eating other animals.’

Yuri looked impressed and Korolev felt relief – the children would get on, Yuri’s visit would be a great success. ‘Tomorrow sounds good,’ he said. ‘First thing.’