

Requiem for a Glass Heart

Chapter 1

St. Petersburg, Russia

It was nearly ten-thirty in the evening when she emerged from deep within the metro station at the Griboedova Canal entrance on Nevsky Prospekt. Normally night would have swallowed the grand Nevsky boulevard at this hour, but it was late June and the White Nights had arrived, a few weeks when the sun never sank more than several degrees below the horizon, precluding darkness, transforming the night hours into an eerie, endless twilight. They also introduced a season of festivities, and throughout the city there were concerts and ballets and parties.

Irina Ismaylova stood momentarily on the sidewalk at the metro entrance and let the hordes of revelers flow around and past her--tourists, hucksters, pickpockets, and students, Gypsy urchins sniffing glue and snatching purses, drug dealers, militiamen, young lovers, and peddlers of every commonplace and oddity. New Russia. In so many ways like the old Russia. Hope in bed with Despair.

She turned toward the Admiralty building, which loomed at the head of the boulevard, its golden dome and spire glowing softly in the rosy light of a static dusk and allowed herself to be dragged along with the throng as they passed over the broad Kazansky bridge. On the canal below, water taxis filled with carousers dawdled on the dark stream beneath the

dull beads of streetlamps strung along the embankment. At the far end, before the canal met the Moika River, she could just see the glint of the harlequin domes of the Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood.

The crowd moved on, past artists displaying their canvases in half-lighted porticoes alongside prostitutes—night butterflies—lingering in the tea-rose glow of doorways. They passed cafes open late in this nightless season, and Irina longed to be one of the lucky people in the happy light of these friendly interiors.

She caught a crowded trolley bus near the Narodny bridge and stood in the opening of the broken door, lost in thought, the breeze of the late spring twilight tugging at the hem of her cotton dress. As the trolley hobbled across the Palace bridge, she stared down at the leaden water of the Neva and imagined that all the things that had gone wrong with her life were drifting by like flotsam on the swirling eddies of the current.

At the Strelka stop, on the northern tip of Vasilievsky Island, Irina stepped off the trolley and, ignoring the milling strollers who lingered along the water's edge in Pushkin Square, headed toward the tree-lined University Embankment across the intersection. Keeping to a well-planned course, she hurried past the classical and baroque buildings that faced the Neva until she drew opposite Rumyantsev Square, where she paused to watch a military vessel plow the river toward the Gulf of Finland. She dreaded crossing to the park, because it was there she would see the face, or perhaps the faces, that would set in motion the final scenes of a drama in which she had a leading and decisive role. As for the faces, she never knew their names. Krupatin only showed her the photographs of the men who would work behind her, and that was all. He was a fanatically cautious man.

Knowing they were already watching her, she turned away from the embankment and crossed the street. She didn't go into the park but entered 2-3 liniya, an adjacent street. The neighborhoods of Vasilievsky Island were among the city's oldest, their sidewalks sheltered by ancient maples and elms, which the season's anemic light had turned into inky silhouettes.

Walking on the park side of the street, she kept her eyes straight ahead as she entered the deepening shadows. The pale green undersides of

the dense leaves were dimly lit by the streetlamps, and Irina could smell the chlorophyll exuding from the moist, fresh foliage.

Someone began walking parallel to her on the murky paths of the park, and just as she got to the corner, where there was a streetlamp, he emerged from the hedges and crossed the sidewalk in front of her. With perfect timing, his face was caught for an instant in the feeble light, and then he was gone.

To her left now was the Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, where she had contrived her first meeting with Vera Vikulova. An art student at the prestigious institute, Vera was a promising painter in the realist style and lived just down the street on Bolshoi Prospekt. Like many women, especially students, who were only marginally self-supporting before the collapse of communism, Vera had turned to prostitution to help support herself after the disintegration of the economy.

She was a pretty dark-haired girl of twenty-four who had had the good fortune—or misfortune—to have caught the eye of Piotr Maikov, a mid-level official in the Security Ministry. Maikov had an irresistible weakness for an ancient pleasure, the *ménage à trois*. Headquartered in Moscow, he made regular bimonthly trips to St. Petersburg, where he never failed to visit Vera, who was ever on the lookout for a second woman. But Maikov was a man of particular tastes. He didn't want just poor students or night butterflies. Vera had to bring women with an air of respectability about them. On two occasions she even provided the wives of other government officials. (Maikov had secretly photographed these sessions.) Vera had proved to be a procuress of considerable talent, for which Maikov paid her very well.

"Right on time," Vera said, bouncing down the steps at the side entrance of the institute. She kissed Irina on the cheek and grabbed her arm, locking them together affectionately as they began walking. Vera was an irrepressibly optimistic young woman, an attribute that was almost heroic in the face of the recent sorry times.

"Nervous?" she asked with a wide grin.

"A little, yes," Irina admitted.

"No need to be. He's not very inventive."

"It's not that. It's just . . . he's a government official. That's a little scary, maybe."

Vera laughed. "Look, when he takes off his clothes, all of your nervousness will melt away. Luckily, he is a very attractive man. One of the younger bureaucrats."

"I can't complain about the money."

"Nooo, neither of us can. And if he likes you--and he can't help but like you--he'll want you several more times. He loves real blondes like you. Too many blondes really aren't when they take off their pants." She laughed.

They continued along the sidewalk for several blocks, until they reached Bolshoi Prospekt at a juncture where art nouveau architecture intermixed with the ornate buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Turning left, they walked on the south side of the avenue, passing strollers who lingered here and there under the maples and poplars, enjoying the evening. Still hugging Irina's arm, Vera talked animatedly about a new CD player she was going to buy through Maikov's special connections. She said he was now bringing her Lancôme cosmetics every time he came to St. Petersburg and that he had promised to get her some Italian shoes next month.

At the corner of 6-7 liniya, they started across the avenue toward a three-story art nouveau building, originally a private home that long since had been broken up into small apartments. It was here that Vera Vikulova lived in a flat that she could afford only by the graces of Maikov's licentious taste.

Sitting at curbside, underneath the brooding trees in front of the building, was a dark-windowed American Lincoln, Maikov's pride and joy.

Irina's stomach tightened, and she furtively scanned the boulevard for Krupatin's faces. There were two. A man carrying a sack of groceries followed a little way behind them, and ahead of them across Bolshoi another man was approaching on a bicycle, coming along the side of the pink-and-white St. Andrew's Cathedral.

The two women crossed Bolshoi to the corner and stepped onto the sidewalk. As they approached the front door of the building, Irina counted four men sitting inside the Lincoln. Like many corrupt officials, Piotr

Maikov had connections to Russia's mafiya, which were only too evident in his choice of bodyguards. Most of these thugs were avid fans of American gangster movies and freely copied the characters' posturing and clothes. But their viciousness was something they had learned on their own, and often it beggared anything they saw in the movies.

"What is your name?" someone inside the car demanded.

"Ignore them," Vera said. "The one we have to worry about is upstairs."

As they started up the stone steps to the entry, Irina noticed larkspurs blooming in tidy flower beds on either side of the landing. At the top they pushed open the leaded-glass door and stepped inside the building.

"We're going to be searched by a bodyguard," Vera warned in a hushed voice as they started up the stairs. "A really rude bastard. I've complained to Piotr, but it's no use. They are idiots about security. Just let him do what he wants. What does it matter, anyway? It's only touching, after all--little enough to put up with for the money."

As they rounded the second-floor landing they were met by a beefy young man with closely cropped hair. Despite the warm weather he was wearing an Italian wool sport coat, and a pair of tiny headphones were clamped to his head like padded calipers. Seeing the two women, he yanked off the headphones, leaving them hanging around his neck as he planted himself in front of Vera and Irina. Flapping the fingers of his opened hands, he beckoned them to draw closer.

"Let's have a little looky, sisters." He was somber, frowning.

Taking Irina's purse first, he opened it, felt around inside, his eyes fixed on her. She could hear the driving throb of a heavy metal band buzzing from the little pads of the earphones around his thick neck.

"Okay . . . okay . . . okay . . ." he said slowly under his breath and then dropped the purse on the floor. "Now . . ."

"Be careful," Vera warned him. "You wouldn't want me to tell Piotr you got in ahead of him."

The bodyguard pulled down the corners of his mouth in a show of indifference.

"Turn around," he said to Irina.

She did, and he started at her ankles and went up her legs under her dress, his big hands massaging her thighs all the way up. At her crotch his hand paused momentarily, and then his thick fingers dug under the tight elastic of the legs of her panties and quickly he was inside her. Irina flinched and froze. But it was not a surprise. This was routine with *mafija* body-guards now. Two months earlier a crime boss in Kiev had been decapitated by a woman who had hidden a small roll of piano wire there.

Withdrawing his fingers, he squeezed her buttocks quickly as he brought his hands from under her dress. Still behind her—he smelled of sour perspiration and sweet cologne—he reached around her and unbuttoned the top of her dress. Putting his hands into her bra, one side at a time, he checked the under wiring. After this he plumped his fingers around in her hair, and then pushed her away from him with a thrust of his pelvis.

She stumbled but didn't turn around as she put her breasts in place and buttoned her dress. As she bent down to pick up her purse and the few things that had spilled out on the floor, she could hear him searching Vera behind her. He hissed once, and Vera snapped, "Stupid bastard."

As Irina stood and turned, Vera was squatting to pull up her panties and the guard was flapping his hand loosely at the wrist as if to dry his fingers. Vera's face was flushed with anger.

Vera quickly straightened her dress, and the two women walked away, their heels echoing on the wooden floor of the old building, sounding melancholy in the dimly lighted hall.

"Stupid bastard," Vera spat again, but even her practiced bravado could not hide her humiliation.

The door to the apartment was in a long, bleak corridor with wallpaper blotched with the stains of long, damp winters. At the end of the corridor a window was open to the street below, allowing the bruised glow of the White Night to fall upon the wooden floor. The sight of it suddenly brought Irina near tears, an impulse she struggled to suppress. She swallowed hard and, for a moment at least, fought off an unshakable sadness.

Vera stopped in front of her door and took a key out of her purse. She gave a little squeeze of encouragement to Irina's hand, smiled, and

then turned and unlocked the door.

In the past two months Irina had come to know Vera's apartment very well, having cultivated the girl's friendship to the point that she was often invited over to listen to music and talk about their common interest in art. They entered a comfortable living room, to the left of which was a galley kitchen and a small table. In front of them was the bedroom door. To the right was a door to the bathroom, which had a second door that opened into the bedroom.

"Come on," Vera said again, taking Irina by the hand and pulling her into the bedroom. Maikov was sitting on the edge of the bed, naked, pouring himself a drink from a half-empty bottle of American whiskey. As he looked around at them, Vera said proudly, "This is Irina."

Irina managed a smile as her stomach began to crawl uneasily.

Maikov studied her in silence as Irina tried to read his eyes. But his mind was clouded by drink, and she saw nothing there, only a vacuum.

"How old are you?" Maikov asked unexpectedly, the glass of dark whiskey halfway to his mouth. "I don't mean it cruelly. You are very beautiful. I just want to know."

"Thirty-two."

He swallowed the whiskey and eyed her. He was indeed a good-looking man, well built, almost muscular. She guessed he was in his early forties.

"I told you, I met her in art class," Vera said, already undressing, dropping her clothes on the floor with routine familiarity. She got on the bed and went over to him on her knees, then bent over him and trawled a small breast across his back. "I didn't say she was young."

"Thirty-two is young," Maikov said, looking over his shoulder at Vera. "You little cow." She giggled. He turned back to Irina. "You want to get your clothes off, then?"

"I bought something . . . special," she said, holding up her purse. "Let me slip it on."

"Be my guest." Maikov shrugged, pleasantly surprised that maybe there was to be a little game in this.

Irina stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her, then quietly closed the door that opened into the living room. Quickly

pulling a wicker clothes hamper away from the wall near the foot of an old cast-iron bathtub, she crouched down on the floor and pried at one end of a loose baseboard. It had taken her many visits to Vera's apartment to find just the right place and then to make it accommodate her needs. When the baseboard came loose, she was relieved to see the butt of the CZ 75, a Czech-made 9mm automatic handgun. Though she had put it there only two days before, she had worried about it ever since, fearful that some unforeseen misfortune would cause its discovery. But it was exactly as she had left it, the barrel pointing down between the wall studs, the silencer screwed into the barrel to keep the gun from falling out of sight. It was already loaded--and cocked.

Irina retrieved the pistol, not bothering to push back the baseboard or the hamper. She had calculated that she would need at least ten seconds after she opened the bathroom door. During those ten seconds Maikov must suspect nothing. She knew he would look at the door the moment he heard it open, so she laid the CZ on top of the hamper and unbuttoned the top of her dress, slipped her arms out of the sleeves, and removed her bra, letting the top of the dress fall around her waist as though she were about to step out of the skirt.

She picked up the CZ and took two deep, steady breaths. On the other side of the door Vera laughed a giddy, silly laugh and Maikov's deep voice mumbled a few indistinguishable words. Gripping the pistol in her right hand, Irina clicked off the safety with her thumb and let her hand hang naturally at her side, hiding the gun in the drape of her dress.

Then she opened the door and stepped into the room.

Maikov and Vera were on the bed facing each other, embracing, and at the sound of the bathroom door Maikov took his face away from Vera's breast and the two of them looked at her. Their heads were close together like those of two lovers in a photograph, cheek to cheek.

Without speaking, Irina swiftly raised both arms, brought them together to grip the CZ, and fired quickly four times. Each of the four bullets found its mark within the eighteen inch square that contained the two faces.

She didn't know precisely where the bullets hit--an eye, a mouth, a forehead--only that the imaginary square had exploded in successive

scarlet plumes punctuated by discrete gassy bursts from the silencer. It was done.

She promptly stepped to the foot of the bed, the gun hanging at the end of her limp arm and looked at the man and the woman. They continued to die, soft liquid sounds sighing from their flesh as the two lives slipped loose of their tenuous moorings: a subtle drawing of an extended muscle, a shallow movement in the sternum. The volume of blood and the way it continued to surge from the bodies always surprised her. She stood rapt, holding her breath.

On her way out she shot the young bodyguard in the throat, then bent over and put the silencer in his mouth and shot him again. When she got to the front door and started down the steps, she saw that Krupatin's faces had disappeared, leaving death behind in the dark Lincoln at the curb.

Outside in the rosy, timeless twilight, she hurried around the corner, past the Cathedral of St. Andrew, past the white Church of the Three Holy Men, through the tunnel of locust trees, to the metro station on Sredny Prospekt.

She rode the escalators down, down into the immaculate and brightly lighted sub terrane, deep below the Russian spring, and within fourteen minutes she had boarded the line to the Finland Station. There she caught the last army-green train for Helsinki. It was a six-and-a-half-hour trip, and it would take the remainder of the night.

She leaned her head against the window, and as the lights of St. Petersburg receded in the everlasting dusk, she wept, wept without ceasing, until she slept.

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