

chapter 1

“**What** do you know about art, Volk?”

Maxim Abdullaev hurls the question through the airwaves as if it were an ax, cleaving pretense.

I cram my Nokia cell phone against my ear. Clattering dishes, jostling diners, and raised voices give me an excuse to delay answering his question. “Hold on,” I say, then step downstairs to my table in the basement of Vadim’s Café near Staraya Street, where I make my office.

Maxim could be anywhere. His headquarters are in the Solsnetskaya neighborhood just a few blocks away, but he changes his personal place of business weekly, sometimes daily, so it is impossible to develop a mental picture of where he is or what he is doing.

Once I’ve moved away from the din, I take a moment to gather my thoughts. “Art? I have a master’s in art history from Moscow University.”

I’m sure that Maxim knows enough about my life to catch the sarcasm. Dead mother, disappeared father, late-era Soviet poverty, and five years of killing and worse in Chechnya unsurprisingly failed

to harmonize into a world-class education. The things I have learned are not taught in universities. He barks a deep-throated chuckle that offers no comfort. A polar bear probably makes the same sound just before it eats.

“Listen,” he says. “You do something for me. Talk to Gromov. Yes?”

“Yes,” I say, as if I have a choice, and Maxim disconnects.



Two hours later, nearing midnight, Gromov clumps like a plow horse into my basement office. The flesh on his bald head and puffy face droops like a shar-pei’s skin and slits his eyes, which are shifty-nervous, with good cause. Valya lurks hidden among the shelves of café sundries behind him.

“You talked to Maxim?” he says.

I grunt acknowledgment.

He collapses into a padded roller chair that disappears, creaking, beneath his bulk. Even its silvery round feet are covered by the hanging folds of his overcoat, where one hand stays buried in a deep pocket. He likes to show off a chromed Colt .45 Peacemaker, an outdated cannon that rends great holes in bodies, a good weapon for a man whose business is intimidation.

“I got a business opportunity,” he begins. “Maxim says you’re the guy to help me assess it.”

“I don’t do partners.”

He knows this. My rule is one source of the friction between us. “Yeah, yeah.” Scarred leather biker boots twirl the chair as he takes in the surroundings.

There’s not much to see here in the basement level. Black slate floor, rows of shelves, exposed raw-wood beams, plaster walls randomly damaged to show the red brick beneath, and dusty ’60s-era slot machines. Gromov is looking for Valya, I know, but she won’t be seen unless she wants to be. He finishes his survey and grins through crooked yellow teeth ridged black with omnipresent chewing tobacco.

“Maybe you *should* do partners.”

“Say what you came to say.” I point to the empty tabletop in front of me. “I’ve got work to do.”

“You know diamonds?”

“Maxim says art, you say diamonds. Which is it?”

“Same thing, asshole.”

When he yanks his hand from his overcoat pocket, Valya materializes behind him and aims the short barrel of a pistol-grip, 12-gauge Mossberg at the back of his shaved skull. But instead of drawing the Colt, he tosses a crystal rectangle that tumbles sparkling through the air before smacking into my palm.

Valya withdraws.

Gromov leans back, smugly oblivious to the nearness of death, while I examine his prize. The stone is about one centimeter square by three long. One end is broken, jagging up into a ragged half peak. Unreadable inscriptions are etched into its flat sides. The etchings are names written in Persian, I know. I toss it back, and he catches it deftly.

“You’re an idiot, Gromov.”

His jaw muscles are so big that his face widens into a pyramid when he clenches his teeth. “Fuck you.”

I wave toward his hand. “That’s a bad imitation of the Shah Diamond. The real one’s five blocks up the road in the Kremlin Armory under more security than Putin.”

That’s a lie. The real one’s gone. It was originally a gift to Tsar Nicholas I to atone for a Russian diplomat made dead in 1820s Tehran. Famous, in part, because all the unlucky owners named in the inscriptions died owning it. Damn near ninety carats preserved in uncut form. Three years ago I helped it make a symbolic but unpublicized journey back to Persia, to the rare arts collection of a spoiled Saudi prince, in return for financial considerations benefiting my primary patron, the Russian army. A better fake than this one sits behind glass under twenty-four-hour security in the Kremlin’s Diamond Fund.

“See?” he says. “You know about this kind of shit.”

“Even the tourists know about the Shah Diamond.”

He leans forward as far as his muscle-bound body will allow and settles flying-buttress elbows on my table, which groans but holds. Like much of the older furniture in Moscow, it was sturdily built by cold gulag hands. “What if I told you I could get the real thing, with nobody the wiser?”

“You can’t. Don’t waste my time.”

“Listen.” He scrunches his broad face, concentrating. “We got inside guys. Military, pissed off by Putin capitalism. They’re like pensioners on the dole while guys like us get rich. They take the diamond, replace it with the fake. Think about it. The fucker’s under glass all day, like goddamn Lenin. Who knows if what’s under there is real? Who cares? In five years some Swiss prick looks at it under a microscope and raises hell. By then, shit, there’s no way to trace who did what and when.”

I say it can’t be that easy, although it was.

“You just worry about your end,” he says.

“What’s my end?”

“Work the distribution angle.” Gromov’s running hot, trembling, obviously excited. “You’re tight with that fag, Nigel Bolles.” He mouths Nigel’s name with curled-lip contempt. “He’ll point you to guys in London or New York or wherever and help us find someone with too much money to buy it.”

“I’m not your guy.”

His jaw drops. “Why not?”

“I told you. I don’t do partners. And I think your chances of getting the real thing out of there are zero.”

Pounding veins ripple under the five o’clock shadow that darkens his enormous dome. “Why do you make things so fucking hard, Volk? Three times I say let’s do business. Three times you tell me to fuck off.” He rolls mountainous shoulders, as if to make room under the overcoat. “Business is getting too tight. Every time I turn around you’re there. You’re in my way.”

He’s right about our businesses bumping into each other, at least the parts of mine he knows about—drugs, identity theft, pictures, and

a Russian brides operation that caters to the middle classes of America and industrialized European and Asian countries. Russia has ten million more women than men, one product of her endless fighting and purging, and she always imports more than she exports. I figure the bride business evens out both imbalances.

Gromov's interests collide with mine in several ways, although he's big into child prostitution and other things that I won't touch. But he's wrong to worry about it, because there's plenty of business for both of us on this little stretch of road below old Lubyanka prison and because the Internet has made us international.

"Don't be so parochial, Gromov."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means we'll get along fine if you concentrate on business instead of territorial bullshit. Steal your diamond. Hump Lyudmilla. Just stay away from me."

He doesn't like my way of rejecting him or the reference to his billowy-breasted girlfriend. He stands so suddenly his chair overturns. Snarls, roars something unintelligible, hauls out his hand cannon, and starts to bear down, slow and amateurish. I don't think he's going to fire. He just wants to make a point. But then the racking slide of a shotgun cracks through everything. He stops dead. His eyes click back and forth like the ones in the plastic clocks that look like tail-wagging pets, but he's careful not to turn around and provoke her.

"It's Valya," I offer, and both of his hands go up slowly until the muzzle of the Colt brushes the bottom of a low beam.

She's behind him, looking amped, ready for anything, almost lost in lace-up boots, cinched parachute pants, and a chrome-colored jacket with its sable-lined hood turned down. The Mossberg rests lightly in her hands. Her white hair sprays backlight like a halo.

"I'm done," he says without turning around.

I nod at him, and he shucks open the overcoat and slots the Colt into a holster made from more than one cow. "I got no choice," he says in the same tone you use to tell a cabdriver to turn right. "I gotta put you out of business, gimp."

The gibe about my foot doesn't bother me. Impending war does, especially given Maxim's newly found interest in the world of art. The General and I had three years to operate freely in that arena. I wish our time wasn't coming to an end.

"Have at it, big man," I say.

He turns fast, but Valya is nowhere to be seen. One last baleful look at me, and then Gromov lumbers away.



Lunch the next day is sliced smoked pork on the sunny side of an outdoor gazebo in grassy Gorky Park. Halfway through, I'm joined by Yuri, a baton-twirling cop. He goes sixty kilos, maybe. He approaches with his spindly chest puffed out, slides his baton into a steel ring attached to his belt, and plops down across from me. The sun glints through the silver birch trees and gambols off the gold double-headed Russian eagle in his cap as I slide an envelope stuffed with American dollars across the plastic tabletop. He plucks the envelope and tucks it under his leg, fast and furtive.

"Shit, Volk!"

His eyes dart, but I'm busy with the pork. I don't care who sees. I stop chewing long enough to say, "There's an extra five hundred for Viktor. And a note."

Viktor commands Yuri's area. He's been on my payroll for two years. The note explains the information I want about Gromov, and the extra money pays for it. Gromov is probably paying for similar reports about me.

Yuri pulls a foil-wrapped sandwich from a brown bag blotched with oil stains, but then he sits and watches me without eating. He sets his cap on the table and licks the down on his upper lip, which has been the same since I met him a year ago, so I suppose it's a mustache.

"Where's Valya?" he asks.

The pork is gone. I suck the fat off my fingers and pat his balding head. He's younger than me, mid-twenties, but the hair gods are fickle.

He's softer than me as well. War and want have hardened my appearance. Military-cut bronze hair, hazel eyes with a feral blaze, stubbled jaw—I look ferocious even when I'm trying not to. Each pat makes his head bounce.

“Don't mess with me, Yuri.”

His eyes widen. “God no, Volk.”

I leave him to his sandwich. I'm tromping through the high grass of Gorky Park to my Mercedes S-600 when the Nokia buzzes.

“Go.”

“It's Nigel.”

Bolles. My largest procurer of foreign business. The British expat fop Gromov asked about the day before. I wait.

“Word's out you're in a war, old boy,” he says.

His lilting voice is strained, due, no doubt, to a night of hard drinking and no morning Stolichnaya fix. “Business is always tough.”

“How can I help?”

Just what I need. “The British are coming,” I say, but he apparently misses the negative reference.

“Precisely. I am at your service.”

“Just keep finding customers.”

“Right.” He clears his throat. It sounds like a cold motor coughing to life. “In that regard, you'll be pleased to learn I have an opportunity for tonight. Swiss conventioners with a common interest.”

“Just drugs?”

“Boys and girls, too.”

He sounds regretful. He knows my scruple, silly as it is. In the end, what difference who makes the money? The children are pin-cushions either way.

I stop on a knoll carpeted with flattened grass that shines like wet jade. Even in early May the wind blows chill over the Moscow River and bends the tops of the stately line of birches that march up the embankment toward the towering peaks of the university. Industrial

haze blurs the cityscape. The spires of Stalin's other Seven Sisters pierce the haze like upthrust stilettos. Gromov is manageable. I know I can dispatch him with relative ease. But he's one of Maxim's poodles, and as chieftain of the Azeri mafia, Maxim can crush my enterprises on a whim.

"Are you still there, Volk?"

I grit my teeth. "I'll meet you at the National Club at ten to arrange the details." My chest tightens, and suddenly I feel as if I can't take in enough air.

"Well done." He's reenergized, doubtless calculating his twenty percent cut.

I end the call, limp to the Mercedes favoring my newly throbbing stump, and crank the shiny black car into heavy traffic, already ruing my decision. The cell buzzes again.

"Go."

"Volk?"

"Who wants to know?"

"It's Arkady."

Several years have passed since I last heard from Arkady Borodnikov—one of my companions in a foster care facility and, later, at a rehabilitation center for boys situated on the Baltic shore. A childhood friend in places where friends were scarce. And last I heard, an Ecstasy distributor and part-time fence in St. Petersburg. Slightly built, with blond hair worn long, too weak for anything except the fringes.

"What's up?" I say.

"I got a weird one for you. A score that needs muscle and hustle. But mostly it needs brains. I thought of you."

I cut through traffic and outraged pedestrians on Kremlevskaya Street, make an illegal U-turn and then a hard right and rattle over unevenly laid bricks on the edge of Red Square. St. Basil's Cathedral looms on the left, its colorful domes like ice-cream swirls. The bright colors and the crowds lined up around the cathedral seem to be mocking decades of Soviet religious oppression.

“Keep going.”

“I’m not even sure how to describe it.”

I’m in no mood for stalling, not while the scum of the deal I just made with Nigel still coats the inside of my mouth. “Spit it out.”

“What do you know about art, Volk?”

chapter 2

The same question posed by two very different men haunts me for the remainder of the afternoon. Twilight drags on past nine this time of year, making the days seem endless. I fill some of the time with paperwork in the basement of Vadim's Café.

At seven I head out to make my semimonthly rounds, visits to the tiny dwellings of widowed pensioners, women I've selected from a long list of those who have lost loved ones in Russia's wars. Tonight I'm due to make three stops at gray Khrushchev-era buildings, distinguishable from the earlier Stalin-era housing by their shoddy concrete-and-glass construction, low ceilings, and faded green halls. Unlike his successors, Stalin built for cold, rock-hard permanence.

The first two pensioners quake from a pitiful mixture of gratitude and fear. Grateful for the three thousand rubles I press into their trembling hands, a third again more than their monthly pension but only about thirty-six American dollars. Fearful my generosity might end if they say the wrong thing. They murmur, "God bless you, my child," and retreat into their tiny units.

The cramped elevator in the third apartment building is broken. Nine stories later, my stump aches as I push through a scarred-metal fire door into a concrete hall, its floor blotched different tints of brown by decades of scuffing feet. The doors are covered in quilted cloth to dampen noise. Forlorn welcome mats greet visitors. I stop on one made of rubber molded into purple violets and knock softly.

Inside, a shuffling slide is followed by snicking locks. The door creaks open. Masha stands to the side as I wedge myself into her one-room flat.

Thirty-three square meters. Ceiling so low I cringe like a nervous turtle. Hot-plate kitchen, one sink, single bed, thirteen-inch TV capped by a foil-wrapped clothes hanger antenna the shape of an inverted pyramid, and a wicker chair built for a boy. I squeeze into the chair and munch the morsel of cream-frosted ginger cake she can't afford but always has ready in token payment.

She's wearing a billowy, floor-length fuchsia shift, hoop earrings, and a frayed leather necklace adorned with carved ivory figurines. Some are animals, but the rest are more mysterious. She gives me a chipped mug of thick tea. The tremors in her palsied hand ripple the surface of the black liquid.

"Do you want another reading? Maybe this time I will see things more clearly." Her grating voice betrays too many years of unfiltered cigarettes and hard living.

"No. Thank you, Masha."

She always asks, and I almost always say no. Last week I said yes, driven by the kind of crazy impulse to which I rarely surrender. She had dimmed the lights. Settled onto the bed facing me, with our knees touching, taken my right hand between hers like a big slab of meat sandwiched between two dried leaves, and closed her eyes. When she finally raised her head, her eyes were unfocused, so wide they seemed to cover her whole face. "There are two," she said. "Two of everything." She kept stroking my hand with the same faraway look, but that was the end of my reading, no matter how many questions I asked. "I can only tell you what I see," she said later that night.

Now she settles onto the bed and rubs her stump. That's how we met, in a clinic for amputees. My prosthesis is state-of-the-art, titanium in carbon fiber alloy with a rebounding spring. I can run and jump nearly as well as I could before the crushed remains of my foot were removed ten centimeters below the knee, although I pretend otherwise. Hers is brittle leather and cracked wood nearly as old as she is.

Across from the bed the television screen flickers black-and-white images of an inner-city bombing in London, or Jerusalem, or New York, I don't know where, and it doesn't really matter.

"At least the Communists made religion go away," she says, staring at the television. "Now the churches are open, but the schools are closed."

I look again at the shadowy images. The building framed on the screen is a mosque roaring flames in Moscow. The cream from the cake fills my mouth with warm, smooth sweetness.

Her eyelids droop. "The capitalists bring drugs, pornography, and guns. And food, too, but no money to buy it."

Russian women qualify for pension at age fifty-five, men at sixty. Most men die before they collect. The women live on. The pension alone is not enough to survive, so they queue for hours for government stamps, sell homemade trinkets to tourists, eat Chernobyl-glowing fruit, and beg. And suffer.

"Russians are very unlucky in administration," Masha says.

I nod slowly. She has summarized our awful history better than any textbook possibly could.

My Patek Philippe chronometer glows nine o'clock. I swallow the last of the cake and set aside the oily napkin. Move to the edge of her bed, which sags with a surrendering squeak. Cradle her leg and massage the puckered skin at the end. It is calloused and rough, darker where her weight against the prosthesis has worked the grit of the world into the creases. She leans back, closes her eyes, and is asleep in just a few minutes. I can't change her into her nightgown. Even the idea would embarrass her beyond salvage. So I wrap her in a frayed wool comforter, set the money on the countertop, and leave as quietly as I can.



Valya's old enough to drive legally, but she doesn't have a license. Usually that's not a problem, because the police know the Mercedes and leave it alone. But tonight, an hour after I leave Masha's apartment, we're in a battered Lada from my pool, cruising in the twilight glow, so I try without much success to make her slow down.

She pulls to a hard stop in front of the National Hotel. Orange cones separate the crowded street from a line of expensive vehicles bristling with antennae and driven by beefy chauffeurs. The National Club is private, patronized by politicians from the adjacent parliament building, expatriates, hotel guests—easy enough to spot and avoid—and businessmen, some legitimate in the sense that the products or services they peddle are not illegal.

“Be careful,” I tell her as I step out, and she gives me big aqua eyes, quirks her lips, and squeals the tires pulling away.

Nigel Bolles has copped a window table for two that offers a nice view of the street, the history museum, and the Kremlin's high, redbrick walls. He is never without an ivory-handled cane, which he uses now to thwack my left leg where the ankle should be. The blow is his traditional greeting, though he seems distracted tonight, fidgeting in his chair, flicking his tongue across his puffy lips. The dark blue lines patterned into his bright red ascot match his navy blazer and the road map of veins in his nose. His mushy, lopsided grin reminds me of a melting wax impression.

“Someday, old boy,” he says, “you'll tell me how you lost that thing.”

The story of my leg is locked in a vault that hasn't even been opened to Valya, although she was there with me for the last year in Chechnya.

“I don't like this table.”

He furrows his gin-blossomed nose. “So this little tiff with Gromov is serious?”

When I stay silent, Nigel levers himself from the padded chair with a huff and signals the maître d'. We meander inland over plush crimson carpet to a table near a baby grand.

“Tell me about the Swiss,” I say, and he does, while I listen with half an ear.

The club is bustling with customers. The maître d’ immediately seats a fat man and a leaner companion at Nigel’s old table. Nigel stops talking while our waiter sets a green-tinged, beaded martini glass of vodka in front of him. He chugs the contents of the glass in two gulps, sighs, licks his lips, and resumes talking about the Swiss.

After we’ve ordered and he’s laid out the deal, I use the Nokia to call Valya. The National Club prizes discretion, so I talk into my cupped hand. “Ecstasy. Coke. Viagra.” The conventioners will powder the drugs into a passé cocktail called a Blue Moon because of the color from the impotence drug. Their choice of poisons dates them to their thirties, maybe forties. Younger clients prefer heroin in one form or another. “And speed.” I tell her the quantities.

“Sex?”

The kids will be aged ten to thirteen. Is it fair to call it that? “I’m calling Gromov now.”

She grunts at the name. She doesn’t like compromise.

I hang up and dial another number. Gromov says, “Is it done?”

Is what done? I wonder. “It’s Volk.”

He sucks his breath, almost a choke.

“You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” His words sound forced.

“I have a proposal for you. I need six from your string for a party tonight. All of their action is yours. No cut with me. I want no part of it.” I’m already sick just talking about it. I swallow my disgust. “I get any more of these deals, they come your way. I’ll carve out the Pig,” I say, referring to a slimy east side pederast. I don’t do business with him or others like him. Before tonight I’ve never touched this sort of thing, but Gromov has never believed that. “And I still want nothing to do with the diamond,” I finish.

More dead-air silence. “Why couldn’t you be this reasonable before?” he says finally. “I gotta make a call. I’ll call you back.”

He’s gone before I can say, *Before what?*

Nigel is florid-faced, at least five vodka gimlets in, but he's developed a high tolerance. The waiter brings appetizers. Half-shell oysters for him, smoked sturgeon for me. Time drags. Conversations buzz the air around us. Russian and English dashed with German, French, Japanese, and, from the bar area, guttural Cantonese. Dinner arrives. I pick at a bloody steak until I feel the time is right to probe further.

"Who do you know who deals in art?" I ask.

This isn't my first foray into paintings. But the times before, I sold impressionists and cubists, working with a moon-faced fence from Munich, now dead. He bought a Picasso sketch stolen from a vengeful Dutch industrialist and ended up chum for the bottom-feeders in a slimy Amsterdam canal. I've never used Nigel for this kind of thing before. Most of my work with Nigel has involved tourists—drugs, prostitution, small-time fencing—with him as the middleman.

He arches an eyebrow and tries a smile, but it seems strained. "Art?"
"Humor me."

He puffs self-importantly. "Sculpture? Painting? What period? There's a great deal of territory here, old boy."

"Paintings." I avoid the topic of my earlier conversation with my foster-care friend Arkady. Misdirection has become a way of life for me. "Impressionists and the like. Cézanne. Degas. Van Gogh. Picasso. Guys like that."

I can almost hear the little calculator in his brain start to whir. "They have quite a variety of such artists displayed at the Hermitage Museum," he says. "Some of it even stolen booty from the war."

I've seen the pieces, including the ones we don't admit to having, and I don't consider any of them stolen, but that doesn't matter now. "Who do you know local who deals in such treasures?"

He makes a show of considering while the waiter clears our table.

To hurry him along I say, "Your cut is five percent. Don't count on anything, though. This is a long shot."

"There is a fine arts dealer with a gallery near Novodevichy Convent. French, so he's, ah . . . flexible. His name is Henri Orlan.

Here's his number." He writes on a napkin and slides it toward me. "If you prefer, I will provide a formal introduction."

"No." I pocket the napkin, shaking my head. I would rather check out Orlan my way.

Nigel nods distractedly and massages his sausage fingers. "There is another. A professor at Moscow University. Tell me, why—"

The outer window explodes in a roar of drumbeating gunshots. Tables overturn. Bodies scatter and shred under a deafening fusillade of bullets.

In the eruption of gunfire, screams, and shattering glass I dive over the table and take Nigel down. A chandelier crashes onto the carpet next to us, blowing shards like tiny knives. Nigel clings to me like I'm a life raft as I drag him through the pandemonium.

By the time we make three meters the firing has ended, leaving only cries of pain and terror, tinkling glass, and the drifting stink of cordite. Huddled with Nigel under a table near the exit, I peer through the smoke. The men at our former table are bloody and tattered. One still belches blood and convulses, but they're both gone. Doors slam shut on a primer-gray panel van jumped onto the sidewalk, and it screeches away from a hail of secondary gunshots—hopelessly belated fire from two ersatz bodyguards crouched behind a black Escalade.

I tow Nigel out of the club, through a door that leads into the shouts and madness of the National Hotel's lobby. Police sirens wail in the distance. I push through the lobby and the adjacent atrium café and out the rear fire exit to a back alley, where the Brit collapses in a dead faint, apparently under the weight of the dawning realization that he was a target, albeit a derivative one. He goes nearly a hundred kilos, and fat makes him unwieldy, but I hoist him onto my shoulder and trudge through the alley to the edge of the tumultuous street.

This near the Kremlin, police and emergency vehicles are everywhere already. Street vendors hurriedly pack their wares and scurry away, hunched with fear, shoving aside dazed tourists and fleeing Muscovites. "Chechen terrorists," one says. "Gangsters," says another. No sign of Valya or the battered Lada she was driving.

Nigel comes to as I unload him against the sooty wall. He seems smaller and lost without his ivory-handled cane. He's a trembling wreck. "He tried to kill me!" he cries.

I assume he's talking about Gromov. "Better to say he was willing to accept your death as a by-product of mine." This does nothing to assuage him, so I grab the wide lapels of his blazer and shake hard to stop his vacant-eyed drift. "What is the name of the man at Moscow University?"

"Woman," he says mechanically. A spray of bystander blood fans his cheek, drying wetly.

"Woman, then. What is her name?"

"Yelena Posnova."

I push him into the street and toward his flat. He wobbles off. He's ruined for the night, and maybe for good. I set off in the other direction. Time to see Gromov now, while the anger is still fresh.