

Chapter 1

It was a reluctant awakening. Something was pushing me unwillingly into the world. I was desperate to return to the darkness, go back to sleep. But I didn't have a choice. The insistent ringing of a telephone woke me.

My head felt like it had been rammed through a mangle; hard floor pressed against my hip and shoulder, forcing a dull ache through the rest of my body. Familiar sounds: Radka's voice crept under the door, whispered unintelligibly in my ear. A car drove past. I didn't need to open my eyes to know that I was lying on the floor of my office, sprawled on the shit-brown carpet. That's tequila for you.

Bile seeped into my mouth, curled my tongue. My eyes popped open; I retched. Vomit erupted from my throat, bit back with rigid lips. Coiled foetally on the floor, cheeks puffed with puke, I needed to purge.

I pushed away from the floor, used the desk to pull myself to my feet. There was a small basin in the corner. I staggered there, spat; then the deluge.

I rinsed the vomit from the sink as best I could. There was a tube of toothpaste and brush next to the basin. I brushed, swilled, rinsed, took stock. I was still fully dressed – minus my coat. It was lying on the floor.

I couldn't remember how I'd ended up in my office. My memory was like a white board with only faint traces of what was once written on it. I sat on the edge of my desk and explored the smudges, the spidery lines, looked for clues; found nothing. The previous twenty-four hours had been erased.

I searched my jacket for evidence, found something. In an outside pocket was a ticket: torn at the edge. It was an entrance receipt, dated the 13th January, for the Savarin Casino, na Příkopě, Staré Město, Praha. My watch told me that it was Monday the 14th. The evidence triggered something in my addled

brain and the events of the previous evening returned. I wished they hadn't.

My memory played in reverse. I'd got onto a tram near the casino in the early hours, headed home. But I was so pissed that I'd got on the wrong tram, caught the one to work instead. By the time I realised, it was too late to turn around. So I continued to the office: passed out there.

I might have caught a taxi home, but couldn't, didn't have any money left; spent it all on the tables. A dip into my wallet confirmed that. Empty. Not even a twenty-crown note. There were some coins in my pocket – barely enough to insult a beggar.

I'd been doing well early on in the evening: had a huge stack of chips in front of me some time before midnight. But as I'd got more pissed I'd become reckless, splodged it all on the table. Before long I'd done the lot. With no cash and all my credit cards on the limit, I spent the rest of the evening sponging off other players like some pathetic addict. By the time the casino closed I'd lost more than my money: I'd lost my dignity.

I hadn't exactly been sober when I arrived at the casino. Spent the afternoon in Molly's in the Old Town drinking Guinness by the gallon and generally making a nuisance of myself.

In another pocket was a crumpled pack of cigarettes, Gaulois: plain. Only one left: wrinkled. I plucked it from the packet, straightened it, poked it into my mouth, lit it with a tarnished Zippo. The acrid smoke seared my lungs. I wondered why I'd taken up smoking again. It was disgusting. But I knew that by the third drag I'd be back in the game.

There was a knock at the door, 'Pán Stark? You are there?' It was Radka, our receptionist. For a moment I didn't say anything, stared at the door.

Another knock, 'Noah?'

Shit. She must have smelled the smoke.

The door cracked open but I got to it before she could open it, blocked it with my foot. She felt resistance, hesitated. I scanned the room, gave my face a wipe, opened the door. She took a step back.

‘Ahoj Radka. Jak se máš?’ I tried to sound cheerful.

But when my breath reached her, she put a hand to her nose, took another step back; so much for the toothpaste. ‘Mister Stark. You here already. You come early?’ She was being polite; there was no hiding the fact that I had slept there. Apart from the breath, there was the stubble, two bloodshot eyes; a dead giveaway.

‘Yeah. Very.’

Just then Bill, my partner, bellowed from his office, ‘Oi, Noah! Come in here will you.’

‘Sure.’ I smiled at Radka, shrugged, squeezed out my office so she couldn’t see inside, closed and locked the door behind me. She didn’t say anything, but looked through the door with x-ray eyes, seeing everything.

She returned to the reception and I went across the hall to Bill’s office. He was almost hidden behind a large desk covered with papers. A coffee machine in the corner filled the room with its aroma. I poured a cup, black, subsided into an old leather couch that faced his desk, slurped, waited.

I said that Bill was my partner, but it was more complicated than that. It was his company: he started it, built it up. But he had a lot of spare office space. So he put an ad in the Prague Post looking for a tenant, someone to share the rent.

I was in Prague at the time, at a loose end, looking for a new profession, saw the ad, moved in. I paid Bill to use the company name and registration; in the beginning that was as far as it went. Bill was involved in import and export: anything that would sell. Samples of his merchandise were spread around the office, competing for space on his cluttered desk. Boxes of herbal remedies were stacked on top of jars of English marmalade. There were cases of Spode dinner sets (made in China) piled up in one corner. On the floor next to the coffee machine were bolts of cloth from Pakistan: an Aladdin’s Cave.

My efforts over the previous year had been a little less diverse. I had built up a small clientele for Czech pressed glass and found a good market for Prim watches in South Africa.

Bill looked up from his papers, 'You look like shit,' he said. Typical Bill: not one for niceties. He was a cockney transported from the East End of London to behind the Iron Curtain months before it fell. Short and stocky, Bill was a regular Del Boy.

Before I could think of a suitable come back, Bill asked, 'What do you know about osmium?'

'Osmium?' The word buzzed around inside my head like a blue fly looking for a way out.

'Yeah, osmium. Do you know what it is?'

'Why?' I played for time, took a long drag on the cigarette, searched my dark recesses for a glimmer.

Bill looked impatiently over his half-glasses, 'Got a query this morning. There's a bunch of ragheads or something like that looking for five kilograms of osmium. Do you know what it is?'

'It's a metal. I think.'

'You think? That's not much bloody use is it?'

He was starting to piss me off. 'Why don't you look it up?'

'Where?'

'On the Internet. Google it.' I knew that would get to him. (He was a die-hard technophobe. His only concession to the twentieth century was a calculator, the one that has a bog roll at the top.)

He glared at me over the glasses. 'You got any contacts in the metal trade?'

'Yes.' I lied.

'I haven't the time,' he said. 'If you want it, it's yours.' He pushed a slip of paper over his desk. It had a man's name 'Jahangir' and two telephone numbers in his ratty scrawl.

I dropped the cigarette into the coffee, left it on his desk, returned to my office. My desk was almost bare. Apart from the laptop computer, portable printer, telephone and an overflowing ashtray, there were only scratches. The furnishings consisted of a solitary bookcase with a Czech business directory in English, and an English - Czech dictionary on the top shelf. On the other shelves were collections of catalogues from most of the Czech glass manufacturers. They ranged from the exquisite coloured Bohemian glass to the cheapest pressed beer mugs. On top of the

bookcase was an old Panasonic fax machine, the kind that uses thermal paper rolls. Save for the tired ‘executive’ chair behind the desk, that was all the furniture I had. There were no family photographs on the walls, no diplomas or certificates, no trophies, no golf balls mounted on expensive looking plinths; not even a chair for my clients to sit on. I didn’t need one. I’d never had a client visit me.

Unlike most mornings, there was also a coat in the middle of the floor. I skirted it, slumped into my chair. I patted my pockets vainly for another cigarette, thought about what had just happened. It was only the second time in two years that Bill had passed any business my way. About a year before he’d asked for help with some pipes that he needed from South Africa. Later I learned that they were for the construction of uranium centrifuges – in North Korea.

It was only then that I realised that the fripperies were just a front. Bill’s real trade was in the difficult-to-find items that people (and governments) couldn’t get anywhere else. Not guns or drugs, or anything sordid like that; but the things that most people have never even heard of: specialist equipment and technology that might be difficult to procure on the open market – especially for countries like North Korea.

I didn’t know where Bill’s customers came from, but I suspected a past life in intelligence (it’s not something you ask). I also didn’t know why he trusted me. Perhaps it was my military background.

I guessed he was testing me; trying to see if I could hack it in his world. Of course, it might also have been that he couldn’t be bothered, had tossed me a scrap. I didn’t complain; I needed the business.

The blue fly continued buzzing inside my head, bouncing off the inside of my skull. I tried to ignore it, but the lack of nicotine was making me twitchy. And I didn’t have any cigarettes: I’d searched everywhere. I suppose I could have gone out, bought myself a packet, but it was freezing out, and I was skint. So I carefully extracted all the stubs from the ashtray, emptied the

contents onto a blank piece of A4 in front of me. There was barely enough for one spliff. I rolled it in a square of paper torn from the Prague Post. There are few things on this earth more disgusting than second-hand Gaulois smoked in old newspaper; but I got the fix I was after.

I pulled a notepad from the desk drawer, inspected the piece of paper that Bill had given me. The name Jahangir meant nothing to me. I couldn't even work out its origin: Pakistani maybe. Then I examined the numbers. One was a landline in Prague 7; the other was a mobile number. I wrote them down on my pad and threw away Bill's scribbling. Underneath the numbers I wrote the word 'Osmium' and underlined it three times.

First I needed to find out what the stuff was, so I opened the laptop and logged on to the Internet. I opened Chrome, Googled 'osmium.'

Wikipedia told me that osmium is the densest element and is used in the manufacture of 'fountain pen tips, electrical contacts and other applications where extreme durability and hardness are needed': boring.

Right at the bottom under 'Value' it said: 'Osmium is quite valuable costing about \$400 per Troy ounce. One of the stable isotopes ¹⁸⁷O is worth about \$25,000 per gram.'

I pulled a calculator from the drawer and multiplied that by five kilograms. I had to count the zeros three times before I was sure of the answer. One hundred and twenty-five million dollars! 'Jesus fucking Christ!' I shouted, like I had just seen the man himself walk into my office.

Radka, wide-eyed, flung the door open. '**Co?**' she blurted. 'What is matter?'

'Nothing.' I lied. 'Nothing. I dropped my cigarette.' But the spliff wobbled between my lying lips. I stubbed it out.

She saw the glow in my cheeks, my glittering eyes. 'You are hurt?' she asked.

'No.' And I immediately felt guilty at the lie. 'I just got a fright. It's nothing. Really.'

She didn't believe me for a moment.

I waved her back to her desk, looked at the total on the calculator again. Worked out a price for the cheaper stuff. That came to \$64,300 for five kilograms; still not to be sniffed at. My commission would be about ten percent on a deal like that. Six thousand dollars would help offset my gambling losses.

I had no idea where to start looking; then something rang a bell. A few weeks before, I had been sitting alone at a roulette table at the Savarin Casino on a quiet afternoon before the evening rush, disconsolately playing the even-money bets to the annoyance of the dealer. A Dutchman sat down next to me.

We started talking, had one of those jumbled exchanges that can only pass between two people who do not share a common mother tongue. His was Dutch. He also spoke bad French and broken English. Mine was English, to which I could add French and smatterings of most European languages (mostly obscenities).

Our conversation was stilted at first, struggling for words. But we shared a vice, and soon we were chatting as if there was no language barrier at all. We switched languages in mid-sentence without regard for tense or syntax. It worked. Having a beer at the bar later, I realised that I could understand everything he said, and he me. Anyone listening in might have thought that we had escaped from some institution for linguistic savants - or worse.

He had given me his card. I quickly paged through my book of calling cards and found his between those of a representative from Josef Flek Glass in Nový Bor and a handwritten card containing only the name, Milena, a telephone number and the bright red imprint of the lady's lips. I'd almost forgotten about Milena. She was a stunner. I made a mental note to give her a call.

The card said that he was a metal trader. There was no email address, so I sent him a fax. I kept it short. I said only that I had a customer for an amount of osmium and asked if he would be able to provide it.

I didn't have to wait long for a response. Within an hour my fax machine started to creak out a reply. It was short and to the point:

'Dear Mr Stark,

Re your facsimile January 18th. Wait for my letter reaching you shortly. No phone/fax please.

Best Regards,
Pieter van Graan.'