

CHAPTER 1: GERMANY (April 1945)

Valentina drifted in and out of sleep. She could hear voices—familiar voices, but concentrating on the words took too much strength. The beatings—the lack of food—the months of hard labor in Ravensbrueck Concentration Camp had drained the energy from her body.

She could not understand how she was alive. Himmler had ordered her death. Her thoughts meandered in a fog. The room bounced and tilted to the left. Her eyes flew open. They focused on her surroundings. She was no longer in the death camp. She lay in an airplane with her head in someone's lap.

She lifted her gaze and stared at the man's face. It seemed impossible. Ivan was in Moscow. He would never leave Mother Russia, and Stalin would kill him if he tried. *How did he get here? How did he find me? How did he get me away from the Nazi guards? Why did he come for me at all? I thought he would never leave his Communist utopia.*

Rain and wind pummeled the plane. It bounced on the currents of air. Ivan wrapped his arms around her as if he could protect her from any danger. It felt good. She had been alone for far too long, and living in the camp had seemed far worse than death. For months she had prayed for it all to end. Now she hoped for a new beginning.

Valentina wondered what her life would have been like if Ivan had come with her to Germany twenty-eight years ago. She would not have been stuck in a loveless marriage nor forced to hobnob with Hitler and the worst of Nazi society. She could have gone with Ivan and their sons to Switzerland and avoided all the mayhem that the Fuehrer and Stalin created.

She had fled Russia after Bolsheviks slaughtered her family. It had been a horrible time, much like the present, with evil men destroying everything that was noble and good. Ivan had been her lover and the father of her twin sons, but he

was a Bolshevik, and he stayed to lead the revolution. She wondered if he regretted that decision and if he wished he had stayed with her.

Her boys were men now. They had come with Ivan to rescue her, and seeing them together filled her with pride and relief that they were alive.

She could feel the plane descending. Her ears popped. She wanted to know where it was landing. Nowhere was safe. She had betrayed the Reich. The SS would kill her no matter where she went, and she hated to think what they would do to Ivan and her sons.

The stolen German Siebel Si 204 transport plane bounced onto the runway of the American base in the western portion of Germany occupied by the Allies. Ivan watched through the window as jeeps sped toward the aircraft and soldiers aimed their rifles. *We're going to die*, he thought. *We should never have entered American air space. It's all my fault.*

The pilot yelled something to him. The wind whistling through the bullet holes in the fuselage drowned his voice.

Ivan prayed that the troops would ignore the swastika on the side of the plane and would not open fire with their automatic weapons. His family was together for the first time. They could be wiped out in seconds.

Valentina had drifted back to sleep. He could not believe how thin and weak she was. He stared at her face. *She's still beautiful. After all this time, she takes my breath away. I was a fool to stay in Russia. I should have come with her.*

The plane rolled to a stop. The pilot opened the door and stepped to the ground. He was a tall man dressed in a shabby American Air Force uniform. He ignored the soldiers who pointed rifles at him. He spoke with a Texas accent to the major who appeared to be in charge. "I'm Lieutenant Colonel John Sloan. I have a critically ill passenger."

The major ignored his salute. "What are you doing flying a German plane? We could have—*should* have shot you down."

“The Germans destroyed my bomber over Poland. They threw me into a POW camp in Poland. We escaped and hooked up with partisans. Been fighting the Germans.”

“We?”

“The men in the Siebel helped me escape. We captured the plane and flew it to Ravensbrueck to rescue our passenger.”

“That’s impossible. You can’t expect me to believe that nonsense.”

Ivan did not care what he believed. He just knew that Valentina could not survive if she didn’t get to a doctor. He left his pistol on the floor, lifted Valentina, and stepped out of the plane. The guards swung their M1 carbines toward him. The major yelled, “Stay where you are.”

Ivan continued down the steps. He thrust Valentina into the man’s arms. “This woman needs help. She’s going to die if you don’t take her to a hospital.”

The officer glared at Ivan but handed Valentina to the private who stood beside him. “Take her to the infirmary.”

“Yes sir.” The private carried her to an ambulance that had parked behind the jeeps.

Ivan pivoted to follow, but the major stopped him, “I didn’t say you could leave.”

Ivan looked back at the ambulance. “I need to go with her.”

“You aren’t going anywhere until I know what’s going on here. Who are you, and what were you doing in an enemy airplane?”

Ivan relied on the English that he learned at Moscow University before the revolution—before he joined the Bolsheviks and before he became Stalin’s Deputy Minister of Defense. He wished he could tell the truth—that he had faked his death and flown from Moscow to rescue Valentina. The problem with the truth was Stalin. If he learned that Ivan was alive and hiding in Germany, he would demand that the Allies return him for trial. Fleeing the Soviet Union was treason in his eyes, and the punishment was death.

“I’m a Pole,” he lied. “The Germans threw me into the POW camp with Sloan.”

“Where’d you learn to speak English?”

“We had schools in Warsaw before the Germans came.”

“So why did you go to Ravensbrueck? Who is the woman?”

He wondered how much he should tell the American. Valentina had been married to a U-boat commander who was a personal friend of the Fuehrer until the Americans sent the vessel with its crew to the bottom of the Atlantic. It seemed best not to mention that fact. “Her name is Valentina Schneider. She immigrated to Munich from Russia during the revolution. She was a leader of the resistance until the SS caught her. Himmler sent her to Ravensbrueck.”

“What’s that got to do with you?”

This time he told the truth. “I knew her before the last war ended. She is the mother of my two sons.” He lifted his gaze to the steps as Karl and Yuri descended them.

The two men stood tall with identical brown hair and blue eyes. Yuri was thinner than Karl due to his time spent in a German POW camp. Otherwise the men were indistinguishable.

The major placed his right hand on his pistol and stared at the twins. “Put your hands behind your head and drop to your knees.”

Valentina awoke to darkness. Her skin felt damp, and her body, cold. She lay on a canvas cot in a large tent. She was not alone. There were at least thirty cots, all occupied by sick men and women. Her stomach churned. She tried to get off the cot but did not have the strength. She leaned over the edge and wretched.

Nothing came up, but her stomach settled. She wanted to return to sleep. Chills kept her awake. She did not know where she was nor who these people were. The smell of rubbing alcohol mingled with the faint odor of vomit.

She saw the IV tubing taped to her arm and the bottle of fluid hanging on a pole beside her and realized she was in some sort of hospital.

Her teeth chattered so loudly that she wondered why none of the other patients stared at her. She heard someone in the next cot praying out loud in

English, and she remembered. *This is an American base. What will they do to us?*

For years the radio and the newspapers in Bavaria had told her that the Americans were barbarians. She assumed it was propaganda, but she also knew that war hardens people.

She could not believe she was alive—that Ivan and her two sons had rescued her. She had no idea how they accomplished such an improbable feat. For that matter, she could not understand how they got together in the first place.

Karl was an infant when she took him to Germany. She had raised him on her estate in Bavaria until Hitler began his chaos and Karl joined the Wehrmacht against her will. She helped Jews and allied soldiers to escape to Switzerland while Karl fought for the Fatherland.

Yuri stayed behind in Russia. Ivan promised to bring him to Bavaria, but that did not happen. Until yesterday, she had not known if he was alive or dead.

Now they were in American hands, and she had no idea what to expect.

She lay awake the remainder of the night until the first strands of morning light revealed men in the uniforms of American soldiers. They brought trays of food to all the patients. She stared at her two eggs, bacon, and toast and wondered how she could eat it all. Her body was used to a bowl of porridge and a piece of bread for an entire day. Just lifting her fork took all of her energy. She was glad that her injured thumb was the left one. She had broken it during her escape.

One of the soldiers helped her to sit on the side of the bed. She tried to eat. After several bites, her stomach balked. Nausea and hunger assaulted her simultaneously. She set her fork on her plate. "I'd like to lie down now."

She was glad for the ability to speak English. Perhaps her knowledge would help her to survive.

"You need to eat."

"I know. I'll try later."

The man left the tray on the table beside her cot. Valentina lay back and closed her eyes. Just sitting for a few minutes exhausted her. She tried to go

back to sleep, but fear kept her awake. *Where is Ivan? What have they done with Karl and Yuri?*

Yuri awoke on a cot in a tent. Karl slept in the adjacent cot. The cots were luxury for both men. The ground served as their usual bed. In spite of the comfort, Yuri could not sleep. He did not like having a guard outside his tent, and he was unsure what the Americans would do with him and his family. He had barely survived being a prisoner of the Germans, and he did not relish being a prisoner again.

The flap flew open. Two American soldiers stepped into the crowded space. They took Karl with them, leaving a third soldier to stand vigil just outside the tent.

Yuri had no idea why they took his brother and left him. They had both withstood hours of interrogation last night. Both had declared they were Polish citizens who fought against the Germans. Both lied.

Karl had fought as a tank commander under Rommel. He had earned the Knight's Cross, and many Germans would have considered him a hero. Toward the end, he became Commandant at the POW camp where Yuri and John were incarcerated.

Although he had led the prison revolt that freed them, it did not seem wise to alert any of the Allies that he had been in charge of a POW camp. The war was almost over, and retribution for all the atrocities that Germany committed was coming.

Yuri had fought for the Russians, but he did not want to return to the Soviet Union. He had survived living in a gulag and felt no desire to repeat that experience. If the Americans notified their ally that Yuri had defected, the Soviets would demand that they return him to them. It was best to deny any attachment to that country.

He dressed and waited for Karl to return. After an hour, a different soldier entered the tent. "Come with me," he said.

Yuri did not want to go, but he knew better than to resist. The man led him to a huge tent. Karl sat at a table eating breakfast with Ivan and John. An American general sat beside John. He looked up at Yuri and waved for him to join them.

John stood and introduced Yuri to his good friend, the base commander.

When Valentina reopened her eyes, she saw Ivan sitting in a chair beside her bed. He looked as handsome as he did in 1916 when he saved her life and became her lover. It had been a union with no future. He was a Communist, and she was a cousin to the tsar.

Ivan placed a hand on her forehead. "Your fever has broken."

She still found it hard to believe that he had left Russia to rescue her from the Nazi death camp. "How did you find me?"

He leaned toward her as if he thought her weakness included her hearing. "A friend at the American Embassy in Moscow helped. One of their spies learned that you were at Ravensbrueck."

She lifted her arm and touched his hair. "But why—why did you come for me after all these years?"

"Because I made a mistake. I should have gone with you when you left Russia."

"Yes, you should have. We could have lived a good life together."

He took the toast from her tray and lifted it to her mouth. "We are not that old. Maybe there is still time."

The tent flap opened. Yuri entered. Valentina studied his face, unsure which of her sons he was. Karl had been on the eastern front with the Wehrmacht for much of the war, and she had seen Yuri only once since he was an infant.

Her son kissed her forehead and said, "Hello, Mother."

"Yuri?"

"Yes."

"They swore to me that you were dead. I would never have left Russia without you."

“I know.” He hugged her and then sat in the chair on the opposite side of the bed from Ivan. He told her about his childhood on a farm near Moscow and how the Germans captured him while he was fighting to save Leningrad.

She told him about her beautiful home in Munich. She could not wait to take him there.

Fatigue overcame her efforts to stay awake, and she fell asleep.