

CHAPTER 1: RUSSIA (December 1916)

Angry waves crashed against the tiny ship, tossing it into the air and dropping it beneath the sea. Ivan Nikolayevich Maximov fought the churning in his stomach. An avalanche of water slammed against him, dragging his body beneath its depths. Brine poured into his mouth. He coughed and gasped for air. His chest smashed into a post. Fluid spewed from his mouth.

He clung to the ropes as the ship rose out of the ocean on the crest of a new wave. Contractions gripped his stomach. He vomited seawater and bile just as the next wave struck.

His fingers contracted around the railing in a death grip as he watched the first mate plunge into the Baltic Sea. Then the ocean foam covered his head again and descended into his lungs. His hands slipped off the rail, and the water claimed his body until another wave lifted the ancient ship.

It tilted to the starboard side causing the hull to emit a moan that dwarfed Ivan's scream. He slid along the deck until his shoulder struck the flagpole. He wrapped his arms around it.

He did not think there was a God, and if there were, he doubted that he cared what happened to mortal men such as himself.

He prayed anyway. *Don't let me die. Not now. I can make a difference. I can change the world.*

His head plunged once more underneath water. He held his breath until the merchant vessel rose again. The creaking of its frame grew loud, and he knew that all his plans and years of preparation were wasted. He was going to die. He would have no part in the greatest transformation the world had ever known.

Then the winds slowed, and the waves ceased crashing over the bow. Ivan crawled to his hands and knees, vomited again, and coughed up dark water until the spasms in his chest subsided. He lay on his back and stared at the dark clouds that threatened to unleash more wind and rain. He rested until a sailor shouted, "U-boat to the east!"

Ivan stumbled to the railing. He could not believe that the little ship had traveled all the way from Stockholm only to face destruction this close to home. The vessel was unarmed. It had no protection from German torpedoes. He looked across the waves and stared at a dark shadow distinct from the sea. The sailor was wrong. The bulge on the horizon was too large to be a submarine or even a battleship. He was looking at land.

He marveled at his luck, discounting any credit to his frantic prayer. The long journey from Switzerland to Sweden and finally to Mother Russia had reached its conclusion. He had eluded the Germans, had survived the storm, and soon would be back in Russia.

The captain steered the ship through the Gulf of Finland to the dock at Petrograd. Sailors clapped and cheered. Some danced.

Ivan ignored the revelry. He saw no reason to celebrate arriving home. No one would be waiting for him at the dock. His parents were dead, and he had few friends. He hoped to encounter none of his past acquaintances. Most of them wished he were dead, and if they reported his presence to the police, those wishes would become a reality.

He wondered why they could not see what was so clear to him. It made no sense for a person's status in life to be determined by his origin. Sliding into the world from a noble womb should convey no more privilege than landing beneath the buttocks of a serf. Every child should share equally in the wealth, as should every adult.

Ivan went to his cabin, changed clothes, and tossed all his possessions into a large duffel bag. He swung it over his powerful shoulders, stepped onto the gangplank, and looked down at the dock. Two burly policemen with pistols on their belts stood watching him. He took a deep breath and stepped forward, praying that they did not recognize him.

The larger of the two imperial officers held out his hand. Ivan gave him his documents. The man stared at them, scrutinized Ivan's face, and returned the papers. "Welcome to Imperial Russia."

Ivan marched into the city. It was time for change, time to end the madness, time to destroy the evil, and time to create a new world of justice and equality.

His view of the world had changed during two years of exile. He had forgotten how primitive Russia was. His home felt like an alien planet. Modern automobiles with electric headlights and magneto horns packed the streets of Zurich. Here all he saw were older cars with gas headlights and tires without treads. Even the carriages were less plentiful than he remembered from the days before the war. Russia lagged decades behind the rest of Europe. The war was taking its toll.

Few shoppers strolled the streets, and storefronts displayed little of interest. The clothes on display in the city's finest stores exhibited no color, and the cloth appeared cheap. In Switzerland the styles had changed during the time he had been there. He liked the way hemlines had moved up to mid-calf. Here they hung to the ankle.

Ivan walked past four middle-aged women. Their threadbare dresses mimicked the cheap merchandise in the store window. He overheard them lamenting their fate. No food. No fuel. No end to the war.

A boy, who could not have been over twelve years old, touched the sleeve of the last woman and begged for bread.

Her shoulders slumped. She shook her head and continued walking. Ivan broke off a piece of hardtack from his pocket and tossed it to the boy. He stepped around two old men, who slept on the sidewalk and saturated the air with the smell of stale sweat. Newspapers covered their bodies as a break against the biting wind. Ivan smiled to himself. *Conditions could not be better. My people were right to send me home.*

Valentina Petrovna Kovalova looked through her glass window as peasants stopped their chores to stare at the three handsome horses and the ornate carriage that they pulled along the snow-covered road leading into Petrograd. She grinned and waved, but no one waved back, and no one returned her smile. She rested her head on her father's arm and closed her eyes.

She did not want to look outside anymore. A year had passed since their last visit. People had smiled and waved then. Now they stared in silence, some seeming indifferent, and others, hostile. Mama said there was nothing to fear. After all, Papa was Count Peter Dmitryevich Kovalov, the tsar's cousin. No one would dare to cause them any trouble.

Valentina's two younger sisters, fourteen-year-old Ekaterina Petrovna and sixteen-year-old Sofiya Petrovna, accepted this without question. Valentina wanted to believe Mama, but if it was true, why did Papa keep glancing out the window, and why had he stored a shotgun under his seat? He had never done that before today.

At seventeen she had her doubts but knew better than to express them. Mama, after all, was German by birth, and she ruled the family with Teutonic efficiency. She would not take kindly to anyone questioning anything that she said.

At this moment, the German novel *Atlantis* absorbed Mama's attention. The family matriarch seemed oblivious to the antagonism outside the carriage. Papa said nothing about her bringing the book, but Valentina knew he wished she would limit such behavior to the privacy of their home where she still spoke German when alone with her children. Papa, however, preferred for Mama and his daughters to speak French like many of the Russian nobility, although they were equally fluent in Russian and English.

The war had grown nasty. Germans slaughtered Russian boys in uniform by the thousands. Almost everyone in the motherland had lost a relative or close friend.

Tsar Nicholas had also married a German woman who dedicated her life to her husband and to Russia, but that did not stop people from referring to her as "that German bitch." Papa did not want them to have similar feelings about his wife.

Ekaterina bounced on her seat and turned to face her mother. "Can we stop soon?"

“No.” Mama placed a finger over her lips. “Keep your voice down, Katia. You will wake Papa.”

Papa, whose formidable bulk slumped against the window, snored in a most undignified manner. Valentina snuggled close to him. Even asleep, he made her feel safe.

Sofiya squirmed almost as much as Katia. “I’m tired. Could we spend the night here?”

Mama sighed. “Maybe when we reach the other side of the city.”

Valentina groaned. “Can we keep riding? I want to see Maria Nikolaevna.” She did not add that they would be safe at Tsarskoe Selo. Even though Nicholas had gone to the front to command his soldiers, his guards protected the town where Tsarina Alexandra and her children lived. They were Russia’s most precious assets. The Romanovs had ruled Russia for centuries. They were Russia.

Of the five children, Maria was Valentina’s favorite. The two girls had been born only months apart and had visited each other frequently all their lives, at least until the war. Often, Valentina would slip into Maria’s room and stay up whispering all night. She wished she were there now. The people outside frightened her.

Mama glanced at her Valentina and shook her head. “No. We are going to stop as soon as we get through the city. Everyone is tired.”

Just then an old woman stepped in front of the carriage. The driver pulled hard on the reins. The horses came to a stop within centimeters of the lady. She did not seem to notice and kept walking. A crowd of beggars surrounded the carriage. A filthy man reached for the door.

Valentina backed away and stifled a scream as the door opened. A callused hand grabbed Katia. Papa reached for the shotgun, but Sofiya fell onto the floor, blocking his arm. Mama hit the man with her umbrella. Valentina wrapped her arms around her sister, but it did no good. The man pulled them both across the seat.

Papa grabbed Valentina's dress, but the silk cloth ripped. She tried to set her feet against the floor, but the man was too strong. Ekaterina's arm and shoulder extended out the door.

Sofiya's sobs and Mama's shouts echoed through the carriage. Papa cursed and grabbed at Valentina's arm but succeeded only in losing the grip on her dress. Valentina fell forward. Her face landed against the man's hand. She sank her teeth into it. It tasted of smoke and mud and decaying fish and then blood.

The horses lurched forward. The man let go of Katia and fell backward. Mama grabbed Katia's arm and helped Valentina pull her back into the carriage.

Sofiya crawled into Papa's arms. Valentina looked through the rear window. The man crawled out of the mud, pulled a pistol from his coat, and pointed it at them. Fire exploded from the muzzle.

The shot hit the carriage. Wood splinters flew into the air. Valentina tightened her grip on Ekaterina and tried to stop shaking.

Papa lifted Sofiya out of his lap, reached under the seat, and retrieved the elusive shotgun. Scowling, he held it with his left hand, stock on the floor and barrel pointing at the ceiling. Valentina wished he would say something encouraging, but he focused on the danger that enveloped his family.

Silence was not Mama's style when she perceived an injustice. She leaned her face toward Papa and raised her voice as if he were deaf. "That man could have killed us. He broke my umbrella. Nicholas needs to send troops here."

Papa shook his head. "He does not have the men to spare. The Germans are getting too close."

Sofiya lifted her head off his chest. "Are they coming to Moscow, Papa?"

He stroked her hair with the hand that was not holding the shotgun. "No, Sofi. It is December. They are going to wish they had stayed in Berlin. No one but us Russians can stand our cold winter. Look what happened to Napoleon."

Valentina kept her arms around Katia. *Surely Papa is right. He knows about war. He was an officer in the army, but it was years ago. What if he's wrong? What will the Germans do to Tsarskoe Selo? What will happen to Maria?*

Ivan strode along Nevsky Prospekt, Petrograd's once-proud thoroughfare. He thought of the first time he had visited there as a child with his father. Somehow it had appeared wider then, and the storefronts, more elegant. Now it seemed provincial compared to Zurich. He stepped into the street. Someone yelled, "Out of the way, fool!"

Ivan jerked his head upward just in time to see three horses charging straight at him. The driver of the troika cracked his whip. The lead horse snorted, sending white smoke from flared nostrils as it leaped forward.

Ivan dove to the side. The horse's chest clipped his foot. He spun. His shoulder struck the road. He rolled and pulled his legs away from the pounding hooves.

The whip cracked again. The carriage tore through a pool of water. Mud splashed in every direction. Ivan cursed as the wet dirt flew against his face. "Pigs!" He ran back into the street, grabbed a rock, and hurled it. The rear glass window shattered.

Most people would have run at this point. Such a provocation invited a bullet to the head from the tsar's police. Ivan stood in the middle of the street, shaking his fists and daring the driver to turn around. The gaudy carriage represented everything that he hated about his motherland. Arrogant nobles kept all the wealth and all the power. *You will pay dearly*, he thought. *Everything is about to change. I wonder how you will like sharing everything you have with everyone else.*

The rock landed on the floor in the center of the carriage. Shattered glass showered onto Valentina. She screamed and clung to Papa. Katia and Sofi recoiled and held to each other. Mama did not move, but her face turned red. Papa lifted his shotgun and pointed it through the broken window. He did not bother to fire. The horses had carried them well out of range of the defiant man. "Damn Bolshevik."

Mama checked Valentina to be sure she had not been cut and then picked the broken glass out of her hair. Katia shivered, partly from fright but mostly from the cold air blowing through the window. "What is a Bolshevik?"

Papa faced forward again, placing the shotgun in his lap. "Bolsheviks are scum who hate Uncle Nicholas." He looked back down the street at the tiny image of the man who was quickly fading from view. Valentina knew that Papa wanted to stop the carriage and to return to rid the world of at least one collection of scum.

She was glad when he directed his attention at her sister. She had not thought he would take them back into danger, but he had looked angry enough to do anything. His voice reverberated with contempt. "Bolsheviks are bad people. They want to take everything we own. They want to kill us all."

Katia frowned. "I want to go on to Tsarskoe Selo today."

Sofi's words echoed Valentina's thoughts. "Please, Papa."

Ivan watched the ostentatious carriage with its richly dressed passengers until it disappeared in the distance. Then, ignoring the mud that covered his clothes, he resumed walking down once familiar streets. In thirty minutes, he reached the Royal Tavern. The old building appeared to sag to the right. Green paint peeled from its exterior walls, revealing an earlier coat of brown.

He stepped into the crowded room and walked to the bar. The pub smelled of spilled beer and mold. Purchasing a double shot of vodka, Ivan went to a back table.

An hour passed. A stocky man with unruly red hair entered the establishment. His gaze fixed on Ivan, who almost did not recognize him. Before the war, the two men had shared classes at Moscow University. Georgii Anatolyevich was fat then with a jolly disposition that conflicted with his staunch loyalty to the cause. His enthusiasm had convinced Ivan to try to change the world.

Georgii appeared to have benefited from the food shortage. He had shed at least thirty pounds. Ivan stood and hugged him. "It is good to see you, my friend."

Georgii placed his hands on Ivan's shoulders and stared at him. "You look stronger than ever."

"Switzerland was good to me."

"So I hear." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "How is Lenin?"

Ivan motioned for him to sit in the chair beside the table. He thought of his mentor and friend who now relied on him to pave the way for his return.

"Impatient to come home. That is why I'm here."

"I know. He sent word that I was to take you to your soldiers."

Ivan leaned backward, spilling alcohol on his coat. "Soldiers?"

Georgii frowned, obviously not pleased by Ivan's troubled expression. "I think I will get myself a drink." He walked to the bar, leaving Ivan to digest what he had just heard.

Ivan stared after him. He had never even served in the military. His draft notice had spurred his flight to Switzerland. He was skilled with a rifle and had been in his share of fights, but leading soldiers was something else. He had expected to organize laborers, to convince them to strike, to shut down the economy, and to paralyze the corrupt political system.

Georgii returned with a beer. "Lenin knew you would be surprised. That is why he has assigned you a veteran fighter to be your adviser and second-in-command."

Ivan grimaced. Having someone second-guessing him would not make it easier. "Who?"

"His name is Valdislav Aleksandrovich Figner. You will meet him tomorrow when I take you to your men."

CHAPTER 2: RUSSIA (December 1916)

The sun descended behind the trees. The sky grew dark. Mama slept sitting straight up with her book resting in her lap. Valentina wondered how she did it. Sleep was out of the question for her. Images of the man who threw the rock and of the Bolshevik who grabbed Katia intruded into her thoughts. Her tongue still tasted the fish on his hand. She did not like being on this road at night, but she welcomed Mama's decision to keep riding.

Home had never seemed so far away. Frozen mud formed sheets of ice on the road, and the wind brought cold air through the broken glass. No one, not even Papa, suggested stopping for the night.

Valentina peered out the window and felt the tension ease. The terrain grew familiar. Tsarskoe Selo was only minutes away. She could not wait to see Maria.

Katia, bored but now awake, straightened her dress. "How much farther?"

"It's just around that corner." Valentina loved the Alexander Palace. To her, it was like a second home. The immaculate lawns and gardens had been great playgrounds when she was a child. Now she just wanted to see her cousins.

Mama concealed her unsavory book in her purse and elbowed Papa in the ribs as the colonnade of Corinthian columns came into view.

The driver stopped the horses. The main door to the Alexander Palace opened. Four servants emerged. One took the reins of the horses. The other three men helped the Kovalov family out of the carriage and collected their baggage. Valentina ignored her mother's frown and ran through the open doors. Not wishing to test Mama's patience, she stopped just inside the palace.

A stoic man with a stern face led the family to the parlor where Alexandra waited. The tsarina was fluent in five languages, but she greeted them in her native German. With her stood a tall man with a scraggly beard and long black hair parted down the middle.

Mama sighed and whispered to Papa, "It's that despicable peasant. What is he doing here?"

Valentina wondered the same thing. She could not understand how Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin had convinced Alexandra that he had great healing power and that only he could save her twelve-year-old son Alexei Nikolaevich from the hemophilia that threatened to take his life. Valentina felt sure that Rasputin was a charlatan. His presence alarmed her. *Alexei must be ill.*

Alexandra's eyes evoked their usual sadness, but she seemed glad to see her relatives. Hugging them all, she nodded toward Rasputin, announcing that he had wanted to greet them himself. Mama ignored him. Papa winced as he shook the man's hand. Valentina felt certain that Papa would spend a full five minutes scrubbing at the first opportunity. He disliked the so-called monk even more than his wife did. Sofi and Katia curtsied with aristocratic poise, but Valentina just nodded.

She did not know what to think of this odd character. He was supposed to be a religious man, but the way he looked at her felt exceedingly unholy. His eyes flashed bigger than normal, and their intense scrutiny made her feel uneasy. It was as if he could see deep inside of her. It made her feel naked. She diverted her own gaze toward the ground. "Where is Maria Nikolaevna?"

Mama's glare reminded her that she was supposed to be demure and quiet, but Alexandra did not seem to mind the interruption. "At the hospital."

Her matter-of-fact tone confused Valentina. No one went to the hospital unless he or she became deathly ill. "Is she sick?"

Alexandra smiled, placing a hand on Valentina's shoulder. "Of course not. She is with her sisters." She reminded Valentina how Olga Nikolaevna and her sister Tatiana were certified nurses, while their younger sisters, Maria and fifteen-year-old Anastasia, were patronesses at the nearby Catherine Palace that had been converted to a hospital because of the war. They were doing their part to help the war effort, just as their father was. Tsar Nicholas had taken over command of the military the previous spring and was at the army headquarters in Mogilev. Alexandra did not expect him to come home anytime soon.

To Valentina's dismay, Rasputin stepped forward and offered his arm. He spoke in Russian that was difficult to understand. "Tsarevich Alexei Nikolaevich is in his room. He is not feeling well, but he asked if you could visit him."

For a moment, she stood frozen in place, wishing there were some way to slip behind Papa's broad figure. She did not share Alexandra's infatuation with this creature. Just being in the same room frightened her. Going off alone with him seemed unthinkable until she saw her hostess's expression. The tsarina expected her to go, and displeasing her was just not done. Mama would be mortified.

Touched that Alexei had asked for her, she stepped forward. Visiting him without the "holy man" would have been her preference, but that did not seem to be an option. She took Rasputin's arm and endured the rank body odor as she followed him down the corridor into the west wing of the palace. He placed his hand over her hand like a caress and did not release it until they reached the boy's room.