

## CHAPTER 1: MOSCOW (September 2, 1939)

Yuri stared into darkness and marveled that he was alive. Lifting his head brought on a wave of dizziness. He surrendered to it, collapsing back onto the bed.

When he reopened his eyes, the only light came from a dim kerosene lantern on the dresser. His gaze turned to the woman sleeping beside him. Her flannel gown failed to conceal her tall, slim figure. He wanted just to lie there watching her breathe. Nothing seemed important except being near to her—not even the dead NKVD agent in the woods behind the cottage.

He moved a lock of blonde hair from her face but recoiled when he saw the blood on his fingers. He sat upright and fought the dizziness that swept over him. *We should not be here.*

Tania sprang awake, placed her hand on his chest, and guided him back to his pillow. “Lie still, Yuri. The bleeding will start again.”

He stared at the blood-soaked dressing on his arm. Clots covered its surface, but they were dry. He threw his legs over the side of the bed. “We can’t stay here.”

Tania frowned. “I know, but you’re too weak. I could barely get you to bed.”

He recalled the flowers he had brought and the wine, dinner, and sex that had preceded the arrival of the secret police agent who had staked a claim on her. “All you had to do was ask.”

She blushed. “I meant after the unpleasantness.”

Yuri thought that was an odd description of the way Valdislav interrupted their love making, slashed his arm with a knife, and tried to kill them. The bastard would have succeeded if Tania had not struck him with a stool and given Yuri the opening to stab a knife into his heart. Yuri had no regrets for killing the man. It was something he had planned for a long time. Valdislav had sent him with his stepparents to the gulag. They died there.

His goal in life had become revenge until he met Tania. Now he just wanted to be with her. Last night had been a turning point. She had at last admitted her feeling for him, and he had realized he did not want to live without her.

Valdislav would not bother Tania again, but their lives would never be the same. "I left his body in the woods. I should have buried it."

"You lost a lot of blood. I was afraid you would die."

"I'm fine now." He stood and walked into the kitchen. The dizziness returned. He slumped onto a straight chair at the table.

Tania removed the dressing from his arm. The gash from Valdislav's knife was deep, but the bleeding had stopped. He touched the bruise on her face and thought of what had almost happened. She turned away. "It's nothing." She peeled off his torn, bloodstained shirt. "You still have glass in your back."

"I know. It hurts like hell." He had fallen onto a broken wine bottle during the fight. Now with every movement, he could feel the shards shift under his skin.

"Hold still." She picked the pieces of glass from his wounds and washed the cuts with soap and water.

Yuri gritted his teeth and tried not to move. This was not the way he had planned to spend his first morning with Tania. He had hoped for a day for earning her trust and for telling her how he felt.

She tossed his shirt to him. "We have to dispose of the body."

"I know." Until yesterday, Valdislav had been her friend. She had been his personal pilot and had lived in his house, helping him recover from a bullet wound. She had left when he demanded more than friendship and she realized that she wanted to be with Yuri. His henchmen would come looking for her as soon as he failed to report for work.

As Yuri fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, Tania turned her back to him and removed her robe. Seeming oblivious to his presence, she dressed quickly, never once glancing toward him. He, on the other hand, tried to look away but failed. Her smooth skin and sleek body made him forget his pain. He wanted to hold her again and to relive the part of the last evening before the "unpleasantness."

Tania walked outside without saying another word. Yuri retrieved his flight jacket and followed. "Do you have a shovel?"

She kept walking. "We don't need one."

"Why not?"

She stopped beside the stiffening body. "We can't bury him here. His friends know about me."

He stared at his dead enemy and thought he should experience some sense of triumph. Instead, he felt nothing except relief that the body on the ground was not his own, or worse, Tania's. "What do you want me to do?"

Tania bent over the body and gripped its ankles. "Take his shoulders. We need to hurry."

Yuri lifted the corpse. "Where are we going?"

Tania stepped backward, straining to hold her half of the weight. "To Valdislav's car. I need to drive him to the airport."

"Why?"

She kept walking. "This is my day to fly the cargo plane. Valdislav is going to take his last flight."

Tania slipped the gears of the shiny, black ZIS into first and pulled onto the deserted dirt road. She felt more comfortable soaring through the sky in an airplane than driving an automobile. After all, she had been flying for years but never owned a car. Her first lover had been a pilot. Pavel had taught her to fly when she was only fifteen. She would have married him if he had not died in a plane crash. Yuri said that Valdislav had sabotaged the aircraft. At the time, she had not believed him. Now she suspected it was true.

She looked at the man who had lured her away from Valdislav and thought how much he had changed in the brief months since she first met him. When he had arrived as a new student at the flight school, he had been so thin that she wondered if he was sick. She had not realized that he had just escaped from the gulag. He had gained weight and put on muscle by running and working out at

least two hours every day. It was as if he were training for an athletic contest. In retrospect she realized that he had been preparing for one night—this night.

Driving in darkness with no headlights proved to be difficult, but she managed to stay on the road as they approached the airport. One hundred meters from the gate, she pulled into the woods and stopped under a canopy of trees. Yuri stepped out of the car before she applied the emergency brake. He opened the back door, grabbed Valdislav's hair, pulled the body off the seat, and tossed it over his shoulder.

Tania placed a finger over her lips and walked through the woods toward the terminal. They reached the edge of the trees about twenty meters from the entrance. She helped him set the corpse on the ground. "Stay here. I'm going to distract the guard."

She returned to the road and walked to the tall fence. Matvei stood at the gate. The thirty-year-old Siberian native had served as a guard since Tania had arrived as a kid. He was friendly then, and his interest had grown as she matured. She hoped that would give her an edge and that he would not call the NKVD.

Removing her hat to allow her hair to flow over her shoulders, she stopped in front of him. "Hi, Matvei."

The huge man lifted his head and grinned. "Good morning, Tania. It is only five o'clock. You're early."

She smiled. "I know. I have the cargo flight this morning. Do you know if I will have any passengers?" She already knew that no one would accompany her, but she had to get him to abandon his post.

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Could you look at the manifest and see?"

Frowning, he shook his head. "It's in the main building. I can't leave my post."

"Please. I can stand here and watch for you." She moved closer to him.

His eyes filled with doubt. "I could get in trouble."

She folded her hands in a begging motion. "It will only take a minute. I will call you if I see anything at all."

He clasped his big hands over hers. "All right."

Tania kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Matvei. You're a dear friend."

He headed toward the terminal building. Before he was out of sight, Yuri approached with Valdislav in a fireman's carry. She waved to him as the terminal door closed.

Yuri sweated and panted for breath as he reached the gate. Tania pushed it open. "Be quick. He will be back any second."

Yuri hurried into the hanger. Matvei stepped out of the terminal building and stared at the closing door. He ran toward it.

Tania yelled, "What's wrong?"

Matvei pulled his pistol from his holster and slammed through the door.

"No!" Tania barreled after the guard into the hanger and almost collided with him. Yuri stood by the airplane with the door open. Matvei aimed his pistol at him and then spun it toward Tania. "Who is this?"

Tania breathed so heavily that she could hardly speak. "It's only Yuri. He's my co-pilot."

The disbelief on Matvei's face intensified. "What is he doing here?"

Yuri answered for her. "I'm a flight student. I came to check out the plane."

Matvei extended his arm, pointing the pistol between Yuri's eyes. "So why sneak in here in the middle of the night?"

Yuri kept his hands in the air. "It's not the middle of the night. It is five o'clock in the morning, and we leave soon. I just wanted to study the controls and to get my feel for the plane."

"Answer my question. Why did you sneak in here?" Matvei's face grew red.

Tania saw that he was getting more agitated, and less in control. She was sure the gun would discharge just from the trembling of his hand. Taking a deep breath, she stepped between the pistol and Yuri. "He didn't sneak in. I opened the gate."

The guard's body tensed. "Why?"

Tania struggled to keep her lips from trembling. If Matvei was going to shoot Yuri, he would have to send the bullet through her. She placed the palm of her

hand against the muzzle of the pistol. "I thought you wouldn't mind. He arrived right after you left, and all he was doing was checking on my plane for me. I was going to tell you as soon as you came back."

Matvei cocked the weapon with his thumb. "He arrived the minute I entered in that building. Why?"

Tania sighed. "We were supposed to meet here at five. He was just a few minutes late."

Matvei shook his head in frustration and motioned Yuri out of the way. He stuck his head into the fuselage of the plane and looked both ways.

Stepping back, Matvei holstered the pistol and turned to Tania. "You should not have let him in. You were supposed just to watch until I came back."

"I'm sorry. It will not happen again. I promise."

He stormed out of the hanger, slamming the door. Tania ran to Yuri and wrapped her arms around him. "I thought he was going to shoot you."

He winced as she squeezed his arm, but it did not stop him from kissing her. "You saved my life."

He was covered in sweat and needed a bath, but never had it felt so good to hold someone. "I guess that makes us even."

"There is an old Chinese proverb that says if you save someone's life, you're responsible for them forever."

Tania rolled her eyes. "You made that up."

"Maybe, but it is a good concept."

"Sure, but we aren't Chinese." She released him and looked around the room. "Where's Valdislav?"

Yuri nodded at the corner of the room. "Under that tarp."

"You moved fast."

"I heard you calling."

Yuri held to his seat as Tania taxied down the runway at 7:00 a.m. She leaned back in her seat and exhaled slowly as the plane gained speed. Flying was second nature for her. She smiled as they took to the air. "We're safe now."

Yuri was not enamored with flying, and safe was not the first word to enter his mind when they left the ground. His twenty-second birthday was only weeks away, and it would be nice to reach that landmark. He had soloed once and had been relieved to land alive. If he had learned one thing in flight school, it was that he was no pilot. Becoming one had a single purpose for him. It was a means to escape from the Soviet Union.

He did not like being in an airplane, but he had to agree that it felt good to be away from the airport. If someone had checked the fuselage before they left, he could not have explained the cold body on the floor. The remainder of his and Tania's lives would have been brief and painful. "I'll feel a lot better when we have one less passenger."

"It's a little soon."

"I know." He put his hand over hers. "I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

Tania kept her eyes on the trajectory of the plane. "At least you showed me how dangerous Valdislav was. I thought he was my friend."

"If you could have seen him the day he sent my parents and me to the camps, there would have been no doubt. He was evil." He still had not revealed to her, or for that matter to anyone, the details of his heritage. He wanted to tell her the whole truth—that it was actually his stepparents who had died in the gulag. He had never known his real mother and had only met his father a few months ago. Their story was as tragic as his, and even now, their safety, as well as his own, depended upon it remaining secret.

Tania flew for an hour before she slowed the aircraft and brought it low over the deserted wilderness. "I think it is time."

Yuri climbed to the back of the plane. Valdislav's body lay between several stacks of wooden crates. Yuri gripped it by the hair and dragged it to the door. Moments later he watched the corpse tumble through the air. His only regret was that Valdislav was not alive and that he was not watching the ground as it beckoned his body to destruction.

He returned to his seat. "It is done."

Tania touched his face with her hand. "We are in so much trouble."

When they reached their destination, Yuri stayed in the co-pilot's seat while workers unloaded the cargo. Tania insisted that he stay out of sight so he remained in the cargo area until the plane returned to the air.

The sky darkened, and rain splashed against the windshield. The turbulence of the flight matched his mood. Valdislav had made no secret of his attraction to Tania. His NKVD friends would consider her to be the prime suspect for his disappearance. "I think we should just keep flying until we cross the Polish border. They can't follow us there."

Tania shook her head. "We don't have enough fuel. Besides, the Germans invaded Poland yesterday. If our own people don't shoot us down, the Germans or the Poles will."

She was right. They had no choice except to return to Moscow. As the storm grew worse, Yuri wanted to land anywhere. The plane bounced so much that he was sure it would break apart.

When Tania landed the plane and pulled it into the hanger, he wanted to give her a standing ovation. His relief evaporated when the door to the shelter flew open and a wet guard announced to Tania that several men were waiting to talk to her in the terminal building.

Yuri fought to control his fear. He had only known Tania a few months, but already he felt their lives had fused. The thought of anything happening to her brought him to the verge of panic. "We should not have come back."

Tania kissed his cheek. "They know nothing except Valdislav did not show up for work today. I'm sure they are just questioning all his acquaintances. You worry too much."

Yuri saw the way her hands shook. *She is trying to protect me.* "I'm going with you."

Her eyes widened. "You can't. If they see your wound, they will know, and we will die."