

One Night in Winter

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arrow books

Prologue

June 1945

Just moments after the shots, as Serafima looks at the bodies of her schoolfriends, a feathery whiteness is already frosting their blasted flesh. It is like a coating of snow, but it's midsummer and she realizes it's pollen. Seeds of poplar are floating, bouncing and somersaulting through the air in random manoeuvres like an invasion of tiny alien spaceships. Muscovites call this 'summer snow'. That humid evening, Serafima struggles to breathe, struggles to see.

Later, when she gives her testimony, she wishes she had seen less, knew less. 'These aren't just *any* dead children,' slurs one of the half-drunk policemen in charge of the scene. When these policemen inspect the IDs of the victims and their friends, their eyes blink as they try to measure the danger – and then they pass on the case as fast as they can. So it's not the police but the Organs, the secret police, who investigate: 'Is it murder, suicide or conspiracy?' they will ask.

What to tell? What to hide? Get it wrong and you can lose your head. And not just you but your family and friends, anyone linked to you. Like a party of mountaineers, when one falls, all fall.

Yet Serafima has a stake even higher than life and death: she's eighteen and in love. As she stares at her two friends who had been alive just seconds earlier, she senses this is the least

of it and she is right: every event in Serafima's life will now be defined as Before or After the Shootings.

Looking at the bodies of her friends, she sees the events of the day with magnified vividness. It's 24 June 1945. The day that Stalin reviews the Victory Parade. Yes, it's one of those occasions when every Russian remembers where they are, like 22 June 1941, the day the Nazis invaded. The war's over, the streets teem with drunken, singing crowds. Everyone is certain that a better, easier Russia will emerge from the war. But this depends on one man whose name is never uttered by sensible people except in reverent praise.

Serafima cares nothing for all this. She thinks only of love, even though her lover is a secret, and for good reason. Usually when schoolgirls nurture such a secret, they confide every detail to their closest girlfriends. This isn't Serafima's style: she knows from her own family that gossip can prove fatal in their age of witchhunting. She also knows that she's somehow different even if she cannot quite decide why. Perhaps it's growing up in her mother's shadow. Perhaps it's just the way she's made. She is convinced that no one in all of human existence has ever known such a passion as hers.

This morning, she is woken by the oompah rhythms of the military bands practising their Glinka down the street, the rumble of tank engines, the clip of cavalry hooves on pavements, and she gets out of bed with the bruised feeling that she has scarcely slept.

Her father, Constantin Romashkin, knocks on her door. 'You're awake already? You're excited about the parade?'

She goes to the window. 'Oh no, it's raining.'

'It'll stop for the parade.' But it doesn't. 'Shall we wake your mother?'

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Serafima walks along the parqueted, chandeliered corridor to her parents' room, past the framed poster advertising the movie *Katyusha*, which is dominated by a statuesque woman in army uniform, toting a machine-gun against a military background. She has jet-black hair and smudges of gun oil on her cheeks like a Cherokee brave. Dramatic letters declare that the movie stars 'SOPHIA ZEITLIN' (Serafima's mother); and its script is written 'BY CONSTANTIN ROMASHKIN' (Serafima's father). *Katyusha* is the Soviet soldiers' favourite film by Stalin's top scriptwriter. Serafima has a strong impression that it was through such scripts that her papa had romanced her mama – it's certainly the way he has kept her.

The bedroom. A heap of silk sheets. There lies 'Katyusha' herself. Long black hair, a bare plump arm. Serafima smells her mother's familiar aura of French scent, French cigarettes, French face cream.

'Mama, wake up!'

'God! What time is it? I have to look good today – I have to look good every day. Light me a cigarette, Serafimochka.'

Sophia sits up; she's naked; her breasts are full. Somehow though, she is already holding a cigarette in an ivory holder. Her father, anxious and fastidious, is pacing up and down.

HE We mustn't be late.

SHE Stop bothering me!

HE You're always late. We can't be late this time.

SHE If you don't like it, divorce me!

Finally, they're dressed and ready. Serafima unlocks the front door just as the doors of all the capacious parquet-floored, high-ceilinged apartments are opening in the pink wedding cake of the Granovsky building (otherwise known as the Fifth

House of the Soviets). The other élite families are coming downstairs too.

In the stairway: the voices of children tremulous with excitement; the creak of well-polished leather, the clip of boot-heels; the jiggling of medals, pistols clinking against belts with starred buckles. First, her parents greet the smug Molotovs – he’s in a black suit like a bourgeois undertaker, pince-nez on a head round as a cannonball, his tomahawk-faced wife Polina in mink. Just ahead of them: Marshal Budyonny of the waxed moustaches as wide as bicycle handlebars is singing a Cossack ditty (soused? At 8 a.m.?), a pretty new wife preening behind him.

On the first landing: Hercules Satinov is in his general’s dress uniform, red-striped trousers and scarlet shoulderboards with golden stars. Her mother embraces Hercules – a family friend since before the Revolution. The Satinov children nod at Serafima with the complicity of school conspirators. ‘What’s news?’ asks George Satinov eagerly. He always says that. She saw them last night at the Aragvi Restaurant and this afternoon they are going to do what they always do. They’re going to play the Game.

‘Communist greetings, Serafimochka,’ says Comrade Satinov. Serafima nods back. To her, he’s a chilly, passionless statue, typical of the leaders. Granite and ice – and hair oil. She knows he’ll soon be standing beside Stalin atop Lenin’s Mausoleum.

‘I think the rain will stop for Comrade Stalin,’ says Mariko, the Satinovs’ six-year-old daughter. She has braided hair and a toy dog under her arm.

‘Probably,’ laughs Tamara, Comrade Satinov’s wife.

Out into the parking lot. Warm summer rain. The air pregnant with the closeness of thunder, the sticky aromas of lilac and apple blossom. Serafima worries that in the dampness, her hair is curling into a frizz of fair corkscrews, and her powder-blue

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dress with its white collar is losing its shape. For all the high heels, bell-shaped hats and the men's scarlet-visored caps, she can already smell the staleness of sweat and waterlogged satin.

Uniformed bodyguards wait, bearing opened umbrellas. The armoured limousines, headlights as big as planets, curves like showgirls, speed forward, one by one, to ferry them the short distance to the Great Kremlin Palace. A traffic jam curls almost twice around its red walls.

SERAFIMA Why are we driving?

PAPA It's only a hundred metres.

MAMA You try walking anywhere in such high heels! You don't know anything about women, Constantin!

Serafima thinks of her lover. 'Missing you, loving you, wanting you,' she whispers. Somewhere not too far away, is he doing the same?

The car deposits them outside the Great Kremlin Palace. The red crenellated fortifications, golden onion domes, ochre and white palaces, are so familiar Serafima scarcely notices them.

What she sees is her entire world as she walks through the Kremlin. She emerges beside the mausoleum, which resembles an Aztec temple. Made of red marble, mottled like an old lady's skin, it looks much lower than it does on the cinema screen. Behind barriers and guards, a wooden grandstand has been erected for the Bolshevik nobility. Serafima knows everything in their lives is secret but nothing is private. She is a 'golden child', and all the 'golden children' attend the same schools, holiday in the same resorts, and, when they grow up, they marry each other. Everyone knows their place and every word has several meanings.

Her best friend Minka Dorova kisses her. She is with her little brother, Senka, aged ten. Their father Genrikh, also in

uniform, gives Serafima a beige smile and a clammy handshake. He is the authority on what does or doesn't constitute 'Bolshevik virtue'. Minka once confided that when she was a toddler, her father placed a portrait of Stalin in her crib.

Her other schoolfriends are there too and just about every commissar, marshal, arctic explorer, composer, or actress she has ever heard of. And their children, most of them from her School 801. A general is bowing at someone. Serafima peers around his shoulderboards and there's Svetlana, Stalin's sturdy, freckled, red-haired daughter, who's not much older than her. She is with her brother, who is wearing an air force general's uniform, and swigging from a hip flask. Vasily Stalin smiles wanly at Serafima and even when she looks away, she feels his surly eyes on her.

Long before 10 a.m., she, her parents and their friends are in their places in the stand next to the mausoleum. The vast crowds and bristling regiments go absolutely silent as one old man, bowlegged and duck-gaited in his marshal's uniform, climbs the steps up to the mausoleum, followed by his comrades-in-arms: Molotov, Beria and, yes, her neighbour, Satinov. Even though Serafima is close enough to see the rain pouring down Marshal Stalin's visor on to his face and to observe Satinov conversing with him, she doesn't care what they might be saying. She can scarcely remember a thing about the parade. She dreams of seeing her lover later in the day, of kissing him. She knows he's nearby and that makes her ache with joy.

The parade is over. It's time for the Game. Escaping her parents, Serafima pushes through the packed throng of dancing soldiers and ambling civilians to meet her friends on the Great Stone Bridge by the Kremlin. She searches for her friends – and there

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they are. Some are already in costume. For some of them, the Game is more than just a game; it's an obsession – more real than reality.

The rain stops suddenly; the air is packed with suffocating pollen, and Serafima loses sight of her friends as she is buffeted by the carousing crowds. The smell of vodka and blossom, the thunderous boom and the drifting smoke of a cannonade, a hundred impromptu street choirs singing wartime songs amidst the salvoes of that fifty-gun salute, surround and confuse her. Then two staccato gunshots, very close.

Serafima knows something's happened to her friends even before the sound has finished ricocheting off the Kremlin walls. As the crowd shrinks back, she walks and then runs towards the noise, bumping into people, pushing them aside. She sees Minka Dorova pulling her little brother into the protective warmth of her coat and staring at the ground as if transfixed. Around her stand a gaggle of her schoolfriends in an oddly formal half-moon formation. All are staring down at something; all are very still and silent.

Minka raises her hand to her face. 'Don't look, Senka,' she says to her brother. 'Don't look!'

Serafima is momentarily petrified by the unspeakable horror of what she sees. The girl is closest to her. She lies still, yet her entire chest, covered by the folds of her costume gown, glistens with scarlet blood that flows like a stream over a rock. She is dead, Serafima knows, but dead only seconds ago and her blood is still spreading across her, settling, soaking, clotting as Serafima watches. But her gaze stays there for only a second before it flits on to the boy beside her. One side of his face is pristine, but the other, shattered by the bullet that ripped into it, is gashed open to the elements. She registers shards of skull,

flaps of pink flesh and white matter that gleams like moist new dough. One of the boy's eyes rests on his cheek.

She sees him twitch. 'Oh God! Oh Christ!' she cries. 'Look – he's alive!' She runs forward to kneel beside him, to take his hand, aware that the blood is soaking her knees, her dress; it's between her fingers. His chest . . . the cravat and velvet of his fancy-dress frock coat are still immaculate because they are burgundy, she notes absurdly. He pants very fast, groans, and then, most unforgettably, sighs – a long bubbling sigh. He quivers all over and then his chest is still. He is no longer a boy, scarcely a person, never the friend she knew so well, and in his present state, it seems incredible that he ever was.

Minka vomits. Someone is sobbing loudly now; another has fainted and lies on the ground. Strangers rush forward and retreat just as fast, horrified. And Serafima hears a loud and shrill scream very close to her. It is her scream. She stands up, backing away, but finds something sharp like a thorn under her foot and when she lifts it up, she holds two bloody teeth.

Some soldiers and a sailor see what has happened and take the schoolchildren in their arms with the rough-hewn kindness of peasants who have been to war. They move them back, shield them. One of them gives Serafima a swig of his vodka and she grabs it back and takes another and gulps until she is almost sick. But the burn in the belly steadies her. Then the police – the *militia* – are there. Red-faced, interrupted amidst their toasting and singing, they seem bleary and lairy but at least they take control of the crowd and move Serafima away from the bodies that she can't stop looking at.

She goes over to her friends, who cling to each other. But Serafima is smeared with blood and they draw back.

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‘Oh my God, Serafima, it’s on you! It’s all over you!’

Serafima raises her hands and they are caked with it.

Silver sparks whirl behind her eyes as she looks back at the bodies and then up towards the red-sapphired stars glowing atop the Kremlin towers. Somewhere in the Kremlin, very soon, she knows that Stalin will be told that two schoolchildren from School 801 have died violently – and that restless, wily, ferocious force will seek meaning in these deaths, a meaning that will suit his own high and mysterious purposes.

As the pink-fractured sky darkens, she is struck by the most unbearable certainty: that this is the last night of their childhoods. These shots will blast their lives and uncover secrets that would never otherwise have been found – hers most of all.

PART ONE

The Fatal Romantics' Club

*Unbelievably happy have become
Every hour, study, and play,
Because our Great Stalin
Is the best friend of us kids.*

*Of the happy childhood we are given,
Ring forth, joyful song!
Thanks to the Great Stalin
For our happy days!*

'Thank You, Comrade Stalin, For Our Happy Childhood',
popular Soviet song

1

Several weeks earlier

The best school in Moscow, thought Andrei Kurbsky on his first day at School 801 on Ostozhenka, and, by some miraculous blessing, I've just made it here.

He and his mother were far too early and now they hovered in a doorway opposite the school gates like a pair of gawping villagers. He cursed his mother's anxiety as he saw she was holding a checklist and running through his paraphernalia under her breath: satchel – yes; white shirt – yes; blue jacket – yes; grey trousers – yes; one volume Pushkin; two notebooks; four pencils; packed lunch of sandwiches . . . And now she was peering into his face with a maddening frown.

'Oh Andryusha, there's something on your face!' Drawing out a crumpled hankie from her handbag, she licked it and started trying to scrub away at his cheek.

This was his first memory of the school. They were all there, the threads that led to the killings, if you knew which to follow. And they began with his mother scrubbing him while he tried to wave her away as if she was a fly buzz-bombing him on a summer's day.

'Stop it, Mama!' He pushed her hand away and proudly rearranged his spectacles. Her pinched, dry face behind metal spectacles infuriated him but he managed to suppress it,

knowing that the satchel, blazer, shoes had been provided by begging from neighbours, appealing to cousins (who had naturally dropped them when his father disappeared), trawling through flea markets.

Four days earlier, 9 May 1945, his mother had joined him in the streets to celebrate the fall of Berlin and the surrender of Nazi Germany. Yet even on that day of wonders, the most amazing thing was that, somehow during the laxer days of wartime, they had been allowed to return to Moscow. And even *that* did not approach the true miracle: he had applied to all the schools in central Moscow expecting to get into none but, out of all of them, he had been accepted by the best: the Josef Stalin Commune School 801, where Stalin's own children had been educated. But this astonishing good news immediately sent his mother, Inessa, into a new spiral of worry: how to pay the school fees with her librarian's salary?

'Look, Mama, they're about to open the gates,' Andrei said as a little old Tajik in a brown janitor's coat, wizened as a roasted nut, jingled keys on a chain. 'What gates!'

'They have gold tips,' said Inessa.

Andrei examined the heroic figures carved on the two pilasters in the Stalin imperial style. Each pillar was emblazoned with a bronze plaque on which, in golden silhouettes, he recognized Marx, Lenin and Stalin.

'The rest of Moscow's a ruin but look at this school for the top people!' he said. 'They certainly know how to look after their own!'

'Andrei! Remember, watch your tongue . . .'

'Oh Mama!' He was as guarded as she was. When your father has disappeared, and your family has lost everything, and you are hovering on the very edge of destruction, you don't need

reminding that you must be careful. His mother felt like a bag of bones in his arms. Food was rationed and they could scarcely afford to feed themselves.

'Come on,' he said. 'People are arriving.' Suddenly children in the school uniform – grey trousers and white shirt for boys, grey skirt and white blouse for girls – were arriving from every direction. 'Mama, look at that car! I wonder who's in it?'

A Rolls-Royce glided up to the kerb. A driver with a peaked cap jumped out and ran round to open the door at the back. Andrei and Inessa stared as a full-breasted woman with scarlet lips, a strong jaw and jet-black hair emerged from the car.

'Look, Andryusha!' exclaimed Inessa. 'You know who that is?'

'Of course I do! It's Sophia Zeitlin. I love her movies. She's my favourite film star.' He had even dreamed of her: those full lips, those curves. He had woken up very embarrassed. She was old – in her forties, for God's sake!

'Look what she's wearing!' Inessa marvelled, scrutinizing Sophia Zeitlin's checked suit and high heels. After her, a tall girl with fair curly hair emerged from the Rolls. 'Oh, that must be her daughter.'

They watched as Sophia Zeitlin straightened her own chic jacket, checked her hairdo and then cast a professional smile in three directions as if she was accustomed to posing for photographers. Her daughter, as scruffy as the mother was immaculate, rolled her eyes. Balancing a pile of books in her arms and trying to keep her satchel strap on her shoulder, she headed straight towards the school gates.

Inessa started to brush imaginary dust off Andrei's shoulders.

'For God's sake, Mama,' he whispered at her, pushing her hand away. 'Come on! We're going to be late.' Suppose his

classmates first sighted him having his face cleaned by his mother! It was unthinkable.

‘I just want you to look your best,’ Inessa protested but he was already crossing the road. There were not many cars and Moscow looked faded, scarred, weary after four years of war. At least two of the buildings on Ostozhenka were heaps of rubble. The Kurbskys had just reached the pavement when there was a skidding rush and a Packard limousine, black and shiny, sped towards them, followed by a sturdy new Moskvitch car. Braking with a screech, a uniformed guard with waxed moustaches leaped from the passenger seat of the Packard and opened the back door.

A man climbed out of the car. ‘I recognize *him*,’ Andrei said. ‘That’s Comrade Satinov.’

Andrei remembered him in *Pravda* wearing an entire chest of medals (headline: ‘Stalin’s Iron Commissar’) but now he wore a plain khaki uniform with just a single Order of Lenin. Arctic stare, aquiline nose: emotionless discipline, Bolshevik harshness. How often had he seen that face on banners as big as houses, on flags aloft in parades? There was even a city in the Urals called Satinovgrad. His mother squeezed his arm.

‘It’s quite a school,’ he said. The bodyguards formed a phalanx around Comrade Satinov, who was joined by a tiny woman and three children in school uniform, two boys who were Andrei’s age, and a much younger girl.

Hercules Satinov, Politburo member, Secretary of the Party, Colonel General, approached the school gates holding his daughter’s hand as if he was leading a victory march. Andrei and his mother instinctively stepped back and they were not the only ones: there was already a queue at the gates but a path opened for the Satinovs. As Andrei and his mother followed

in their wake, they found themselves right behind the Satinov boys.

Andrei had never been so close to a leader before, and glanced back anxiously at his mother.

'Let's step back a bit.' Inessa gestured: retreat. 'Best not to be too far forward.' Rule number one: Don't be noticed, don't draw attention. It was a habit born of long misfortune and suffering in this flint-hearted system. Years of being invisible in crowded stations where they feared their IDs would be checked.

Torn between fearful caution and the craving to rub shoulders with his new classmates, the Golden Youth of Moscow, Andrei couldn't take his eyes off the nape of Comrade Satinov's neck, shaved military style. Before many minutes had passed, they found themselves near the very front of the line, almost between the two gold-crested pillars of the school gates, under a hot Moscow sky so cloudlessly blue it seemed bleak.

Around Andrei and his mother, the crowd of parents – well-dressed women, men in golden shoulderboards (he saw a marshal up ahead) and creamy summer suits, and children in the red scarf of the Pioneers – pressed close. Beside him, Inessa was sweating, her face made ugly by worry, her skin dry as grey cardboard. Andrei knew she was only forty – not that old – yet the contrast with the glossily coiffed mothers of the school in their smart summer frocks was all too obvious. His father's arrest and vanishing, their banishment from the capital, seven years' exile in Central Asia, all this had ground her to dust. Andrei felt embarrassed by her, irritated by her and protective of her, all at the same time. He took her hand. Her crushed, grateful smile made him think of his father. Where are you, Papa? he wondered. Are you still alive? Was their return to Moscow the end of their nightmare or yet another cruel trick?

Comrade Satinov stepped forward and a woman in a sack-like black shift dress, which made her resemble a nun, greeted him.

‘Comrade Satinov, welcome. I’m Kapitolina Medvedeva, School Director, and I wish on behalf of the staff of the Stalin School 801 to say that it is a great honour to meet you. At last! In person!’

‘It’s good to be here, comrade director,’ replied Satinov with a strong Georgian accent. ‘I’ve been at the front and haven’t done a thing with the children since the twenty-second of June 1941’ – the day Hitler invaded Russia, as Andrei and every Russian knew – ‘but now I’ve been summoned back from Berlin to Moscow.’

‘Summoned,’ repeated the director, blushing faintly because ‘summoned’ could only mean an order from Marshal Stalin himself. ‘Summoned by . . .’

‘Comrade Stalin has instructed us: now the war is over, we must restore proper Russian and Soviet values. Set an example. The Soviet man is a family man too.’ Andrei noticed that Satinov’s tone was patient and masterful yet never arrogant. Here was Bolshevik modesty. ‘So you might be seeing too much of me at the school gates.’

Director Medvedeva put her hands together as if in prayer and took a deep breath. ‘What wisdom! Comrade Satinov, of course we know your family so well. Your wife is such a valued member of staff and we are accustomed to prominent parents here but, well, a member of the Politburo – we . . . we are overcome, and so honoured that you’ve come personally . . .’

The boy in front of Andrei was shaking his head as he listened to this performance. ‘Mother of God, you’d have thought Papa was the Second Coming!’ he said aloud. Andrei wasn’t sure whom he was addressing. ‘Are we going to have

this bowing and scraping every time he drops us off at school?' It was one of Satinov's sons, who had half turned towards Andrei. 'It's bad enough having a mother who's a teacher but now . . . oh my God. Nauseating.'

Andrei was shocked at this irreverence, but the dapper boy, with polished shoes, creased trousers and pomade in his bouncy hair, seemed delighted at the effect he was having on the new boy. He gave Andrei an urbane smile. 'I'm Georgi Satinov but everyone calls me George. English-style.' The English were still allies, after all. George offered his hand.

'Andrei Kurbsky,' said Andrei.

'Ah yes. Just back in the city? You're the new boy?' asked George briskly.

'Yes.'

'I thought so.' And the smile vanished. Without it, George Satinov's face looked smug and bored. The audience was over – and Andrei felt himself falling back to earth.

'Minka!' George was embracing a curvaceous girl with dark skin. 'What's news?' he was asking.

Andrei paled a little and felt his mother beside him again. They both knew what George had meant by 'Just back in the city?' He was tainted by exile, the child of a Former Person.

'Don't expect too much. They'll all want to be your friend in the end,' whispered Inessa, squeezing his arm sweetly. He was grateful for it. The girl called Minka was so pretty. Would Andrei ever be able to talk to her with George Satinov's confident, care-free style? Her parents stood behind her with a little boy. 'That must be her mother over there. I recognize her too. It's Dr Dashka Dorova, Health Minister.' Minka's mother, brown-skinned and dark-eyed, wore a cream suit with pleated skirt more suited for tennis than surgery. The most elegant woman Andrei had seen

in Moscow stared momentarily at Inessa's darned stockings, scuffed shoes and the aubergine-coloured circles under her eyes. Her husband was also in uniform but tiny with prematurely white hair and the pasty skin of the Soviet bureaucrat: the Kremlin Tan.

Andrei was just trying to regain his natural optimism when his mother pulled him forward.

'Thank you, comrade director.' Satinov had assumed a winding-up tone. 'We appreciate your work too.' Director Medvedeva almost bowed as the Satinovs processed inside, and then she turned to Andrei, her face a mask of solemn rectitude once again.

'Yes?' she asked.

As he looked beneath the lank hair and beetly brows into her severe eyes, he feared that she would not know his name or, worse, would know it in order to send him away. Inessa too shook her hand with an expression that said, 'Hit me. I'm used to it, I expect it.'

'Mama, how will we pay for this school?' he had asked Inessa only that morning, and she had answered, 'Let's live that long first.' Would he be unmasked as the son of an Enemy of the People and expelled before he had even started?

Director Medvedeva grudgingly offered a hand so bony the fingers seemed to grind: 'The new boy? Yes. Come see me in my office after assembly. Without fail!' She turned to the Dorovs: 'Welcome, comrades!'

Red heat spread through Andrei's body. Director Medvedeva was going to ask how he would afford the fees. He recalled how often the tiniest signs of hope – his mother finding a new job, a move into a larger room in a shared apartment, permission to live in a town nearer Moscow – had been offered and then taken away from them at the last moment. He felt his composure disintegrating.

The vestibule led to a long corridor.

'Shall I come in with you?' Inessa asked him. There was nothing so daunting as the first day at a new school, yet one moment he needed her warmth beside him, the next she metamorphosed into steel shackles around his ankles. 'Do you need me, darling?'

'Yes. No. I mean—'

'I'll leave you then.' She kissed him, turned and the crowd swallowed her up.

Andrei was on his own. Now he could remake himself: reforging was a principle of Bolshevism. Stalin himself had promised that the sins of the father would never be visited on the son but Andrei knew they were – and with a vengeance.