

Chapter One

Detective Inspector Vasiliev of the Moscow police was alone in his office, standing behind his desk, and holding the order of the Cross of St. Stanislav in the palm of his hand.

"A pretty trinket," he muttered to himself, "but I'll never get to wear it." He remembered thinking the same thing when the Minister of Interior had pinned the medal on his tunic. His old friend Ivan, known to everyone as the Iron Colonel, had pulled strings to get him the decoration.

"After all," Vasiliev could hear Ivan saying, "you came close to saving the life of the Tsar. Damn near got yourself killed in the process. And you caught the swine who planned it."

Vasiliev had felt nothing at all—no elation, no bitterness. "Coming close wasn't good enough," he had replied. "Besides, no one can ever know who the swine were. They were too important."

There was no need to say more, not to Ivan. He understood better than anyone what would happen if the story got out. The terrorists of the People's Will could not have assassinated Tsar Alexander II without inside help. But only a few people knew it. There were two traitors, a high-ranking officer of the Gendarmes and a personal advisor to the heir to the throne, Alexander Alexandrovich, who had become the new Tsar. The bereaved son, now Alexander III, hadn't a clue. If the truth got out, he would have to live under the shadow of patricide. His reign would have been over before it began. Something similar had happened before in Russia. At the turn of the century, Alexander I had been involved in the murder of his father, Paul. Vasiliev thought about it. Things had changed since then. The conspirators who had killed Paul were nobles. It had been a court *coup d'état*, and it was hushed up. At that time there were no press lords eager to sniff out a scandal, no large educated public to lap it up. But society had changed since the reforms of the eighteen sixties. If the press got wind of a conspiracy implicating trusted officials of the police and the Tsar's entourage, the news could shake the empire.

Standing on the steps of the Ministry, Vasiliev had shared his thoughts with Ivan. "Imagine the rumors, the suspicion, the accusations, Ivan. Out of such stuff revolutions are made." They had turned up the *karakul* collars of their greatcoats to protect them from the raw April wind blowing off the Neva. Vasiliev had almost felt sorry for Ivan struggling to hold the high moral ground.

"Some day..."

Vasiliev had cut him short. "Let's leave your 'some day' to the historians. The Stanislav goes into the desk drawer."

Now he was back in Moscow, and the drawer was open in front of him. He dropped the medal into it, closed it and turned the key. He rubbed his left side, as he must have done a dozen times a day now. The pain had subsided. But taking a deep breath would call it up soon enough. Some small fragments of the bomb that had killed the Tsar were still embedded in his flesh. The doctor assured him they would work their way out over time. "So," he had responded, "I'll be finding shrapnel in my bedclothes for the next ten years. To hell with that."

A soft knock interrupted his thoughts. It would be Serov.

"A message from Petersburg, beggin' your pardon, Vasili Vasilievich."

"Serov, you know you only beg my pardon when official business shows its ugly mug."

Serov looked shocked. He had been begging Vasiliev's pardon ever since they were children wrestling in the dust of the village street. He never thought about why he did it. Maybe it was just to remind himself that he had begun life as a serf, the property of Vasiliev's father. Or maybe he had learned it from his young friend, Vasya. That's what he called Vasili when they were kids together. He also used to beg the pardon of the village elders, just to tease them, with the same mocking words. The trouble was, Serov reflected, that these days just saying it without thinking would no longer be possible. Just as it was no longer possible to call Vasili Vasilievich 'Vasya'. Something had happened to turn those plain words upside down. He decided to avoid the issue for the time being, and turned to the samovar.

"A strong tea, then?" He had already guessed what was needed from Vasiliev's furrowed brow.

Vasiliev glanced at the message, impatiently flicked the paper with his forefinger, and tossed it on the desk.

"Another summons from Ivan. Bless him and forgive him his sins. He doesn't know what to do with us any more. No one does. Just this morning the chief hinted that a long leave might be best for me. A long leave abroad! Imagine! The chief who has never gone further west than Tver. It's too absurd!"

Vasiliev crossed to the window, his eyes trailing a few lazy snowflakes, the sign of an early spring squall. There was a light accumulation on the rooftops and the grass verges along the Tverskaya Boulevard. It would be a heavy snowfall, but it would melt quickly, leaving traffic mired and the constables splashing around in a sea of mud.

"Now, Ivan wants to send us off to Kiev."

"There are worse places than the Mother of Russian cities." Serov snapped his mouth shut before 'beggin' your pardon' escaped his lips. This was going to be more difficult than he thought.

"Not right now there aren't."

"You mean the disorders."

"Disorders? What's this, Serov? You're beginning to sound like some Petersburg bureaucrat. They're beating up the Jews and wrecking their shops. It's a full scale pogrom!"

Serov passed him a cup and saucer. He observed Vasiliev's expression and decided everything was going to go badly that day.

"Sergeant?"

Serov stared at the cup and saucer as though they were mortal enemies.

"The duty officer collected all the tea-glass holders, said they had to be polished, so they gave us these instead."

"For God's sake! Don't they have anything better to do, like polishing doorknobs?"

Serov winced. He hated to see Vasiliev irritated. It was not like him. There, he was stroking his side again. Serov gave a short cough.

"Yes, yes. I know when I'm behaving like an old woman. All right, Ivan wants me, which means us, to leave at once. An official mission to Kiev. He wants to start an inquiry. Wants to know the reason for the pogroms. It seems that the Tsar is upset that law and order are breaking down. Fine, it worries me as well. But why me—us? I—we're detectives not students of society. The reason, my dear fellow, is to get us involved in a messy business that can only end badly."

"But the Iron Colonel wouldn't..."

"No, not on his own. But read the message—here, where it begins: 'My instructions are etc. etc.' 'My instructions' means it's not his idea. He has to be careful. He might have written 'You are instructed etc.' More ambivalent, but dear old soul he wanted us to know that he's had an order from above, and he's just the messenger boy. And then he adds, 'Coming to Moscow to brief you.' At least he'll give us the full story. So let's drink our tea from saucers, watch the snow pile up on Tverskaya, and see what the files can tell us about Russia's long love affair with pogroms."

Serov sighed as he sipped his tea. He knew he was in for a history lesson. Vasiliev was already rummaging in his files. Serov leaned over to read the handwritten label on the thickest one. *Sectarian crimes. The Jews. Newspaper clippings.* Vasiliev slammed down another one labeled *Official Reports*, raising a small cloud of dust. The labels were neatly printed. Vasiliev placed his hands palms down on both files. "Did you know, Sergeant, that the first pogrom took place in Odessa in 1821?"

Serov assumed the stance of parade rest, his fingers laced behind his back. "No, Vasili Vasilievich, I did not." Since he knew nothing at all that had happened in 1821 it seemed like a safe answer.

"And then another in 1849. In both cases the Jews were beaten because they failed to doff their hats when an Orthodox Christian procession passed by." Vasiliev opened the first file. "Then ten years later, again in Odessa. Look at this. An article in the *Odessa Messenger* for April 21; a quarrel among children during Holy Week touched off a riot. Foreign sailors joined in—God knows what for—and the Jewish quarter was sacked. A few wounded, one man killed."

Serov thought for a moment. "What were our boys doin'?"

"The Odessa police birched everyone in sight, it seems. But things got worse the next time, in 1871. See how it seems to happen every ten years, and now 1881, once again."

"Ten years is long enough to forget a birching, but not long enough to stop hatin' Jews."

"Very profound, Sergeant. Give us some more tea will you? This is thirsty work. Now let's go back to '71. Kotsebu was Governor-General. A local man, good family, you know, but he had trouble controlling the riots. It looks as though Russians and the *Malorusy*—Little Russians—were involved for the first time. It was the Greeks who had been the *pogromchiki* up to then. So, I stand corrected. Our countrymen are not in love with pogroms; they learn to like it from others."

Vasiliev took his cup without looking, poured some tea into his saucer, and sipped it noisily. He turned another page, allowing a few drops to spill. Shaking them clear, he continued reading. "'Officials counted eight fatalities from individuals who drank themselves to death with stolen liquor.' So much for the lofty ideals of the defenders of the faith."

"They always say the price of vodka is too high."

Vasiliev looked up, but Serov had raised his saucer to cover his expression.

"A bad joke, Serov. Really shameful!" Serov shrugged.

Vasiliev picked up another folder from the official file. "It seems there are some decent souls in Piter who were upset that there weren't enough police on the streets. But it isn't clear who was responsible. No investigation, no reprimands. It's always the same. We never seem to have enough people to run the country."

"Could be the people who are runnin' it...well, I've no right to criticize my superiors."

"Does anyone have the right these days? We ought to be careful, Serov. We are wading into deep waters. Pretty soon we'll be in over our heads. That's not a comfortable position. Let's have a look at the timetables. Then I'm going to send you off to the station for tickets. D'you know Kiev? No? Neither do I, not really. I passed through on my way to the Danube front in '77. A beautiful setting, on

hills like Rome, though it hardly looks like an imperial city. Not as old either, though it was founded in the ninth century. Imagine what Russia would be like if the Mongols hadn't destroyed it. That let the Poles in, and they held the city for three centuries. So Kiev has been ours again for only the past two hundred years. If things had been different, we would be southerners instead of freezing half the year in Moscow or Piter. But aside from a little history, I don't know much about the place."

Vasiliev tapped his fingers on the open file.

"We need some help or else the locals will lead us by the nose. Ivan is arriving tomorrow, but I'm not sure I'll like his recommendations. I'll listen. I'll argue, but then I'll give in. Why does Ivan always get around my best arguments?"

"Beggin'..." Serov quickly corrected himself. "Your conscience. He goes right for it."

"*You* never appeal to my conscience, Sergeant. That's why we always get along. So, Ivan will convince me. I'll resent it. And then? We'll remain friends. But this time I can't just depend on what he tells me. I need another line into Kiev. You know what that means. After Ivan a visit to Papa, the source of all knowledge."

Serov nodded. "Bow to your father for me and tell him I remain his humble servant."