

Chapter One

Inspector Vasiliev, Vasili Vasilievich to his acquaintances, Vasya to his friends, entered police headquarters with a sense of foreboding. He had just solved the murder of the merchant Boldreyev. But something else was bothering him. True, the chief wasn't happy about the outcome. To hell with him. So the murderer was a titled noble rather than the shop assistant. They didn't like to send nobles to Siberia. Who cared if a shop assistant got shipped off? No it wasn't the Boldreyev case but the reports of the attempt on the tsar's life.

"Hey, Vasya! How goes it?" Two detectives lounging on a leather sofa broke into his thoughts. He nodded and gave a half-smile showing his crooked teeth and without a word closed the door to his office

"What's eating our Count today. He broke the Boldreyev case."

"Right, but he also broke the chief's heart." They laughed.

"I still can figure him out, I mean Vasya, after all these years. Why in God's name did he give it all up for this?" He gestured vaguely. The drab yellow paint was beginning to peel from the walls; scratched wooden tables and worn out chairs were scattered throughout the lounge.

"Forget it. That's a mystery you'll never solve. Nobody knows why except maybe Serov, and he'll never tell. I figure by this time Vasya could have been a Colonel in the Guards, or a Titular

Counselor in one of those cushy Petersburg offices. That is, if he'd stayed in service."

"Did you ever ask him about it? Why he joined the police? Hell, he graduated from the Page Corps. A decorated veteran. All the right contacts. To give it all up. It doesn't make sense."

"Once he gave me a little lecture. All about his debt to the people. Christ, he sounded like one of those intellectuals. Mooning over the peasants."

"Well, you've got to remember. His mother was one, a peasant I mean."

"Yes, but papa was Count Vorontsov."

"Peasant blood is thicker."

"You really think that?"

"Got a better explanation?"

"No. Still, to give up being a Colonel in the Guards..."

"You and I weren't cut out to make such sacrifices." They laughed again, stood up, shook hands and went to their desks.

Vasiliev slumped into his chair and began to skim the newspapers on his desk. They all carried the same story. Reported it the same way. "By the grace of God, His Imperial Majesty, Alexander Nikolaevich, narrowly escaped death at the hands of murderous revolutionaries who would turn Russia into a charnel house." So much for Katkov in the *Russian News*. And then all the tripe about standing firm in the face of terrorist threats. Nothing about the lapse in security; nothing about the failure to make an arrest. But you could hardly expect journalists to take on the Gendarmes.

Sergeant Serov knocked softly before coming in. He took a few steps into the office and stopped, hesitating. A glance at Vasiliev was enough to warn him. He decided to occupy himself with the samovar and wait for whatever was coming. It would be something out of the ordinary. He knew all about that look. It was familiar to him since childhood when they were playmates in his mother's village. That was before Vasya went off to the Page Corps and returned as Vasili Vasilievich, an accomplished young gentleman. Well, not quite or at least not always one. That look of his; yes, it was all about what Vasiliev like to call unfairness in the world. He had tried to explain this to Serov more than once. Serov would nod in agreement. But to a man like himself, born a serf, life had to be taken as it was. There was no sense breaking your head over fairness. But Vasiliev was a fair man. That was why Serov felt bound to him, not as a slave or a serf, forced to submit to a master in the old type of bondage but as a man acting of his own free will.

"Sergeant, how do you explain the easy access?" Vasiliev accepted a glass of tea from Serov along with a small dish of jam as he swept the papers from his desk.

Serov knew immediately this was not a question he was expected to answer. Access to what? By whom? He glanced at the papers on the floor. He did not set much stock in newspapers. Vasiliev would tell him in time what he had to know. Serov gave a non-committal grunt and returned to the samovar.

"The man was working there for days, perhaps weeks. Smuggling in sticks of dynamite, for God's sake. And no one checked his documents? No one wondered why he was working

alone? All of this after four previous attempts on the tsar. Remember the derailed train, and all the rest. The Gendarmes are supposed to be on top of these things. Just ask them. They'll tell you. On top of everything. Listen Serov, how do these things happen?"

Serov felt that now he was expected to make some response. "A clever lot, the revolutionaries. Maybe a wee bit more clever than the Gendarmes, if you see my meanin'." It was safe he knew to slander the Gendarmes. Vasiliev had always shown his dislike for the secret police. "The boys in blue" he called them. But Vasiliev did not rise to the bait.

"It looks like Zheliabov's work." Vasiliev sipped his tea and gazed hard at the papers lying in a heap on the floor. "Damned elusive, that man." Vasiliev drank his tea quietly, thinking about how it all had started.

Almost two years had passed since the revolutionary organization called the Land and Liberty Party had split into two wings. The moderates called themselves *Cherny peredel*, Black Partition or the Partition of the Land. A catchy phrase, that. What they meant by it was the redistribution of Russia's rich black earth among the peasants. No compensation for the landlords, of course. But they weren't killers. They believed in propaganda. Hoped to spread socialism among the peasants by preaching to them. Well, it was naïve. Really rather harmless despite the babbling of the Gendarmes. Zheliabov on the other hand was a different piece of work. He had split off from them, formed a terrorist faction. Called themselves the People's Will. They set their sights on the tsar, quite literally. They still believed that if

they could kill him the whole creaky edifice of the Russian autocracy would collapse. Vasiliev wondered how much of this Serov knew.

“Smacks of Rousseau,” he blurted out.

Serov’s head jerked up.

“Sorry, my friend. You quit listening to my lessons before we got to Rousseau.”

“There was work to be done on your papa’s estate, Vasili Vasilievich. The bailiff wasn’t none too happy about my shirkin’ my duties. He’d shout at me. ‘What’s all this rubbish about history lessons?’ I can tell you, he came down hard on me. My ears still ache at night from the boxin’ he gave me.”

Vasiliev laughed. “Come on, Sergeant that was twenty years ago.”

“Right, permanent damage it was.”

“All right, so we’ll begin where I left off. Rousseau was a French philo..., a French writer, eighteenth century. He had an idea about ‘the General Will’, that’s what he called it. All the people would exercise power for the common good.”

“Sounds a fine idea to me.”

“Of course, it does, ‘sounds like’ that is. But there are some problems. You see Zheliabov claims to speaks for all the people and then goes hunting for the tsar.”

“He didn’t asked us in the village about that.”

“Not exactly. But you remember how the students came to village in the summer of ‘74 preaching socialism.”

“Wet behind the ears, they was. Pretty silly, some of ‘em. Well-meanin’ enough, I guess. We listened politely. Some laughed

in their faces. A few rascals turned 'em in to the police. It was their hands, you see, all white and soft. So who was goin' to do the work under this socialism?"

"Well, Zheliabov thought much the same about going to the people. Peasants were too ignorant. So he pushed the idea of terror. All the naïve, nice, gentle types with the soft hands took the name Partition of the Land. Doesn't have the same ring as People's Will, right?"

"No, but sounds another good idea. If you're still askin' my opinion."

Vasiliev burst into laughter. Serov loved to provoke that effect. The full-throated tenor voice. It recalled the old days. How they used to sing peasant songs together, he and Vasya. There always seemed to be a balalaika player strumming in the background. But that too stopped when he went away to the Corps.

"I'll have to watch you, Sergeant. Before long you'll be joining up, calling for land and liberty."

Serov was tempted to say, not unless you do. Instead he gave another grunt and added for the sake of good manners. "Aye, that's what they used to call themselves, I remember now. Land and Liberty."

"Right. And now they've parted ways, the terrorists in the People Will and the preachers in the Partition of the Land. There's your history lesson for the day. It still doesn't help us clear up what happened at the Winter Palace."

Serov put down his glass and began picking up the scattered papers.

"Well, God's in heaven and Petersburg's far away."

“And it’s none of our damn business either. I had my chance to join the boys in blue. I don’t regret not taking it.” Serov knew the reason for this and for the other mysteries that baffled the detectives in the lounge. But he would have been hard put to state it in so many words. It all had something to do with Vasiliev’s mama; his youth spent half in the village and half in the manor house. Then there were the books people would bring him wrapped in strange looking paper and written in foreign tongues. Now they were all crammed into his office. There were many other things that Serov had glimpsed but hadn’t fully understood about Vasiliev’s life. He thought that maybe now Vasiliev would speak of Irina. After all she was one of the revolutionaries now. Probably not a terrorist, but still an illegal. Serov waited, but was disappointed.

“Be a good fellow will you and clip the papers for me. I’ll file them later. Right now I have to finish up the report on the Boldreyev case. The chief has been snapping at me more than usual. Didn’t care much for the way things turned out.”

Serov tried to find the right words to get him talking about her. But he couldn’t think of them. Vasiliev turned back to his desk, pulled out sheaf of foolscap and began scribbling.

He was moving in the right direction, Serov thought, but then he stopped in his tracks. He’d done it before, not too long ago. Was this getting to be a habit? He hoped not for she was part of his life too.

They worked quietly side by side, the only sounds being the scratching of the quill, the snipping of scissors and the bubbling of the samovar. Occasionally, Serov would pause to read an article,

quietly moving his lips, or Vasiliev would lift his head, sometimes for longer than it might have taken to find the right word. Each time Serov waited expectantly, but he was not rewarded.

Vasiliev wrote swiftly but he was distracted by thoughts that had nothing to do with the Boldreyev case. Serov knew him only too well. Once he had mentioned the revolutionaries he would start thinking about Irina.

Serov was right; Vasiliev kept wondering about her and her dangerous new life. She must have gone from Land and Liberty to the Partition of the Land, he thought. He couldn't imagine her as a terrorist. No question, she must have split from Zheliabov and his gang. Still, he never understood why she had joined the revolutionaries in the first place. Why, oh why had she done it? The question haunted him. Sure, it was the same question they always asked about him, whispered behind his back. Everyone from his father to his teachers and friends in the Pages. Why or why did you do it? Top of the class, son of a Count. All right, illegitimate, but no one cared so much about that. A brilliant career. Was it a whim they wondered?

He sighed and selected another sheet of foolscap, numbered it and started on the second half of his report. He cursed under his breath. He needed to concentrate all his thoughts on the case. A small error could cost him the conviction. The evidence was clear. But they had to be made to see it. Thank God for the jury system. In the old days there wouldn't have been a chance to convict a nobleman. Not on forensic evidence. Then he caught himself. Old days, Hell. The jury reform was less than twenty years old. And the prosecutor was a tough relic of the old days. Another skeptic

like the chief. Doubted that a noblemen could commit murder except in a duel.

He set down his pen again. Serov watched him carefully, but then turned away. Vasiliev read over what he had written. Vague images waited for him at the end of every paragraph. They were too polite to break into the flow of his prose. But they would not disappear.

On papa's estate, they were inseparable, he remembered. The three of them, he, Irina and her brother. Where were they always rushing off to? He couldn't remember. But there was another image. It was all too clear some days, like this one. He was standing on her veranda holding out her brother's sword. The sword of a dead hero. Brought back from the Turkish war. Her look of great sadness, no tears. He had trouble holding back his own. A year later she vanished. There were a few traces. He followed them until the trail went cold. Then the rumors came. The sources were not reliable. But the end of the story was always the same. She had joined the nihilists, revolutionaries, call them what you will. He could see no connection with her brother's death on the battlefield. What was eating at her that she wouldn't share with him? He didn't tell her family about the rumors. Perhaps they still didn't know the truth. He couldn't be sure. One thing was clear to him. They too were hiding something behind their public face of grief over the disappearance of their daughter. He caught a glimpse of it in the repressed anger of her father, a Colonel in the Guards. A happy family destroyed. It seemed to happen more and more in Russia these days, he reflected. He had

no sympathy for the old patriarchal ways. But the path to whatever lay in the future was not going to be easy.

He moved on to the third section of his report. Irina's image was fading. He bid her another farewell. Too much romantic poetry, he thought. It's a problem. Being a literate bachelor. Too much Pushkin, perhaps. But then again could one ever have too much Pushkin? He would better spend his time with Dostoevsky. There was a man who understood the criminal mind. Reading him might be too much like taking home a case file. But he had to admit that Dostoevsky knew a hell of a lot more about the criminal mind than his colleagues lounging out in the corridor.

A loud knock startled him. The door opened a crack and a hand slipped in waving a telegram. A screechy voice sang out: "The capital calls, Vasili Vasilievich. You are a favored son." Serov snatched the message, fighting the temptation to slam the door before the fingers withdrew. But he resisted and handed Vasiliev the coded message.

"Ivan has written. He's coming to Moscow and wants to consult. We know what that means. He's going to try to drag me somewhere I don't especially want to go."

"Where might that be?" asked Serov with as much sarcasm as he dared.

"You know perfectly well, my friend. Attempt on tsar, followed by message from Ivan to consult; the Iron Colonel in action. Damn it, he won't leave me alone happily hunting murderers in Moscow. He's lonely up there in Piter, the high world of politics. He wants company. Well, he's not going to get it, old friend or not."

Serov was gazing out the window at a rook that had settled on the sill, and he began to whistle softly.

“Whistle as you will, Sergeant. Only a summons from the tsar is going to make me budge. My holidays are coming up next week. You know where I’ll be. Off to the Urals to hunt. And once I’m gone they won’t find me for a month. That’s why I never tell you exactly where I’m going. You’ll never have to lie for me. Never have to choose between betraying me or getting yourself cashiered.”

Une chambre séparée for two men was unusual, but the owners of the Yar were nothing if not discreet. Ivan’s high rank was a sure guarantee that the utmost discretion would be observed. After coffee had been served there would be no further interruption. As Vasiliev expected Ivan had prepared the ground carefully. He led off with the latest court gossip about the tsar’s scandalous liaison with Ekaterina Dolgorukaya. The former lady in waiting to the recently deceased tsaritsa would soon become his wife. “Morganatic marriage, of course. She’ll be called Princess Yurovskaya.” Then he laid out the news about the latest plans for reform. Loris-Melikov, the Minister of Interior—Ivan was now calling him the dictator of the heart—had just about persuaded the tsar to call a consultative assembly. He hoped to rally public opinion against the revolutionaries. “A big gamble” was Ivan’s verdict, “but better than a constitution.”

“You see, *mon vieux*, our agents tell us that people are afraid to take sides. They won’t condemn the revolutionaries. But they won’t line up with them either. Fence-sitters. Here’s what’s hard

to believe. The attempts on the tsar's life haven't won him any sympathy. We have to convince the doubters. And that is what Loris-Melikov, our dictator of the heart, has in mind. There are lots of rumors about a constitution. All nonsense. What he's proposing is an elective assembly of wise men. We have some you know. The point is to get them to advise the tsar on what needs to be done to win over the public."

Vasiliev toyed with his dessert fork. He was tempted to lick off the last traces of chocolate. But this was not done in polite society, and Ivan was polite to his finger tips. He replaced the fork on his plate and gazed wistfully at the last éclair. This too would have to be sacrificed to good taste and left for the waiters to demolish in the kitchen.

"Half measures," he growled, less concerned about a constitution at that moment than the éclair.

Ivan looked shocked. "What do you mean? Anything more radical would never pass the ministers."

"So, to Hell with the ministers. Alexander Nikolaevich is the autocrat, isn't he? His father would never have hesitated. Do what he had to and the ministers could go to Hell."

"Those were the old days, Vasya." There was a pause. Maybe there were some good things about the old days, Vasiliev thought. But no. He was being petulant.

Ivan guessed the time had come to make his approach. Vasiliev was like some hundred-gun frigate; you had to get under the range of his cannons before you could board.

"Listen, Vasya, all this brings me to the business at hand. I need your help to be my man in Moscow."

“Ah ha! Now I have to sing for my dinner. In that case I am going to have this last éclair. Where do you think they get their chocolate, from Belgium?”

Ivan leaned forward in what Vasiliev recognized as his best conspiratorial manner. Was it copied from some cheap melodrama at the Malyi Theater? These bureaucrats needed some modern stage direction.

“There are rumors that the revolutionaries are planning some outrage in Moscow at the opening of the season. A special detachment of Gendarmes has been designated to mount guard at the early balls, especially at the big aristocratic houses.”

“Good,” Vasiliev managed to mutter between bites. He swallowed hard. “It’s the business of the boys in blue. But why would the terrorists switch targets from the tsar to the aristos. Doesn’t make sense.”

“The theory is that an attack on the nobility would further undermine confidence in the reform, you know, as a way of dealing with the subversion”

Vasiliev couldn’t help smiling. He loved that evasion, the subversion. Such a delicate way of portraying the bombers. Made them sound like nasty writers.

“So you want me to dust off my old dancing shoes? Not a chance, Ivan. It’s not my kind of job. Besides I’m off on holiday and I’ve earned it after the Boldreyev case. I bruised some noble egos. I would not be a welcome guest in the big houses, let me assure you.”

“Nonsense, Vasili.” Vasiliev noted the sterner tone. Ivan might start calling him Vasili Vasilievich soon, or, God forbid, Inspector

Vasiliev. Then things could get heated and more official than he wanted.

“Before you accuse me of stupidity in addition to talking nonsense, let me tell you something, Ivan. With all due respect, one lonely police Inspector nosing around the big Moscow houses is not going to impress or dissuade any bomber worth his salt. I don’t even know the cast of characters. The boys in blue have been studying these madmen for years. They know their moods and *modus operandi*. I’d be like a white crow in a pine forest.”

“The point is, Vasili (so things hadn’t gotten that much worse) that you’ve got it all upside down. It is precisely the Gendarmes who are the white crows. They stand out in any crowd. You know that. Whereas you.... You have that great repertoire of disguises. You can just melt into the background of any place you go. I’ve seen you...or rather I’ve not seen you in action. Once in a merchant’s bazaar, another time at a peasant *skhod*. I knew damn well that you were there. I still couldn’t pick you out. And neither will the revolutionaries. As for the holidays. We’ll double your time off...

“It won’t do. The hunting season will be over. It may be my last chance to get Burya.”

“God in heaven, does hunting down that damn bear mean more to you than...”

“...than going off on a wild goose chase. Yes! Rumors about some kind of outrage. Hell, that could mean anything. Imagine me showing up at Prince Bagration’s or anybody else’s ball in some outlandish disguise. First thing some eager Gendarme would arrest me. The whole idea is ludicrous.”

Later Vasiliev remembered with some chagrin his remark about Prince Bagration's ball. Well, how could he have known? And would it have made a difference if he had been there?