The Kirilov Star

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Chapter One

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Countess Anna Yurievna Kirillova was weeping. Mikhail, her beloved husband of thirteen years, was sending her away and she could not bear it. She was weeping so copiously she could not see to thread her needle. She wept for a comfortable life that had been swept away, for her husband and her children, for the state of her once-elegant home, for a future which terrified her, for Russia. A petite woman in her mid-thirties, she had a fragile beauty which her husband was afraid would never stand up to the harshness of the new regime; she was an innocent, passing from the care of her father to the care of her husband and, until the Revolution, she had never known want or fear, had never had to lift a finger, not even to dress herself. Now there was nothing but fear.

'Let us stay here, Misha,' she begged for the hundredth time. 'We will be all right here. No one will trouble us, surely? We have already given up our home in St Petersburg, isn't that enough?' She had forgotten, or refused to

acknowledge, that the city was now called Petrograd.

They had left it in the dead of night in the spring of 1918 when it became obvious that the old regime was gone for ever, that soldiers and sailors sent to put down the uprising had joined the revolutionaries. The tsar, on his way back from military headquarters supposedly to take charge of the situation, had been stopped and arrested. There had been pandemonium: people being shot for no reason except speaking up against the violence, others leaving the city on carts packed with personal belongings and being stopped and made to go back. Even more were looting, mostly furniture which could be chopped up for firewood.

Mikhail, fearing worse was to come, had brought his little family to their *dacha* near the small town of Petrovsk, in the foothills of Ukraine. He remembered as a child taking trips from there to the Black Sea to picnic and swim and enjoy the warm weather with his parents and siblings, of pony rides and walks in the woods, of swimming in the lake, of hunting and fishing, of picking grapes from the vines on the sunny slopes, of eating figs straight from the tree. If anyone gave a thought to the future, it did not filter down to the boy he was.

After he had married in 1907, he had brought his wife to spend the summer at the *dacha* with his widowed mother each year, and when Andrei was born the baby had become part of the annual exodus along with his nursemaids, Mikhail's valet and Anna's maid. The Great War, which had engulfed almost the whole civilised world, had put a stop to that; Mikhail had joined the army and there were no more trips to Ukraine. Andrei had vague recollections of the carefree holidays, but Lydia, born in 1916, had never been. When the time came to leave Petrograd, Anna had

talked to the children of their villa and estate, painted a rosy picture of what it was like, and so the children, at least, had been happy to leave slushy Petrograd behind, unaware of the true reason for their flight.

In the old days they had travelled in luxury, with their own compartments and sleeping quarters on the train, and a mountain of luggage Mikhail's mother swore they could not possibly do without, but the journey from Petrograd in 1918 had been accomplished in a packed freight train with only the luggage they could carry between them. Their travelling companions had been a strange mixture: wealthy kulaks in fur coats, stockbrokers in suits and suede shoes, shopkeepers with nothing left to sell, former servants, army deserters, priests deprived of their status, peasants in tunics and felt boots, all living together in the close confines of what appeared to be a cattle truck.

The train had stopped frequently and people would jump down and wander up and down the line, anxiously asking, 'Why have we stopped?' and they would try to buy food and water before being hustled back on board and the train jerked into motion again. There had been a very long wait in Kiev where everyone was on tenterhooks while papers were scrutinised and some passengers taken off under guard, for what misdemeanour no one knew. More people had crammed on the train, and after another twenty-four hours of hanging about, during which they dared not leave their places, except one at a time to answer the call of nature, they had set off again.

By the time they had arrived at the house some thirty-six hours later, they were all exhausted, bruised and very hungry, having eaten what little food they had brought with them early on in their journey, expecting to be able to

buy more; but all Mikhail had been able to obtain was half a loaf of stale bread and a lump of goat's cheese.

Kirilhor was a large white villa, the hub of an extensive estate, and had once been opulent. Servants had cared for it, had scrubbed the floors, beaten the heavy Persian rugs, polished the furniture and cooked delicious meals, but now it was run-down and faded, the paint was scuffed, the windows and much of the beautiful furniture had been broken. The four-poster beds, the elegant wardrobes and chests, the red plush sofas and armchairs, the grand piano, the pictures and ornaments, had nearly all been burnt or looted. Outside, the garden was rank and overgrown, its surrounding parkland had been seized by the peasants and shared out between them. The trees had been felled and sawn up for firewood, and crops were growing where once stately poplar, lime and oak had grown. A carriage and a droshky still stood in the coach house, presumably because the peasants had found no use for it. But without horses both were useless. Mikhail was glad his parents had not lived to see it.

It was not what the children had been led to expect because Mama had been describing it in summer, not in the winter when the trees were bare and the lake frozen. And the house was dirty – certainly not the little palace they had expected, with warm fires in every room. And where were the servants? Of the twenty or thirty servants who had served them before the war, there was only Antonina Stepanova Ratsina, the children's nurse and governess, whom they had brought with them, Ivan Ivanovich, a giant of a man with a head of thick black hair and a beard to match, and his plump wife, Sima. They were there to welcome them and had killed a chicken to make a dinner,

though it soon became apparent that food was no easier to come by here than it had been in Petrograd, where long queues formed every day for what little bread there was.

Two days later, Mikhail had left them to rejoin his regiment. With Ivan's help, Anna had cultivated the patch of earth closest to the house to feed them, knowing that, according to the new laws filtering down to them from the capital, it was no longer theirs to cultivate. Anything they did not eat was the property of the state and had to be handed over, but as the area was in the hands of the counter-revolutionaries, there was no one to enforce the laws and they bartered their surplus for other things they needed, as everyone else was doing. Ivan had managed to buy a skinny horse for them so that he could take Andrei to school in the droshky. Lydia was not yet old enough to go.

It was far from the comfortable life Anna had been used to, but she had proved herself more resourceful and resilient than her husband had expected and they had established a kind of rhythm at one with the seasons. A colonel in the army, he had come home when he could, but in the last eighteen months he had only been back twice and then only for a few days at a time. It made the subsequent partings even more difficult. He had considered staying with his family, but he could not bring himself to desert as many others were doing. He wanted his wife just as she wanted him and those few days together were heartbreakingly poignant, but, loyal to the last, he had returned to duty.

Now even that had to end. The Constituent Assembly, formed after the Revolution under the Provisional Government, had been overthrown and there was civil war, the Red Army against the White, a war without frontiers,

where friend opposed friend, brother took up arms against brother, servant fought master and the enemy was unseen and yet everywhere. The Reds were determined to put an end to aristocratic privilege and power, and the Whites were equally determined to hold on to it. And in the middle of it all were the Greens who belonged to neither side and took advantage of whatever situation prevailed. It was chaotic and, what was more, dangerously anarchical. Mikhail felt they had jumped from the cooking pot into the flames of the fire.

'The fighting is getting closer all the time,' he told Anna. He was a tall man, with strong dark features and a handsome beard. Too agitated to stand still, he paced the room, window to door and back again, only just avoiding crashing into the table at which his wife sat sewing by the light of a feeble lamp. Oil was running low, so he dare not give her more light. They had chosen to use a room at the back of the house which looked out on the forest and not the road to the town and they had drawn the heavy curtains, so that no chink of light escaped to reveal their presence. 'And if the Reds find us . . .' He stopped, unwilling to put it into words, but she knew what he meant. He was a distant relative of the Romanovs and he was afraid they would share the fate of Tsar Nicholas. Officially he was being held for his own safety, but the rumours were flying that he had been executed by the Bolsheviks without even a trial, though how you could justify trying a ruler ordained by God, Anna had no idea.

'I am not risking it happening to you and the children,' he said, glancing down at the floor where two pairs of legs stuck out from beneath the cloth-covered table, one clad in knickerbockers, the other lace-frilled pantalettes. Andrei

and Lydia were whispering together, playing some secret game whose rules only they understood.

'But why would they harm us?' his wife asked. 'We have done no wrong, broken no law, unless you count stealing the garden which always used to belong to us, and who else wants it? And you have served Russia faithfully as a soldier all through the war and since.'

'I served Russia but I also served the tsar, Annushka,' he said patiently, trying with a calm voice to make her understand and not frighten her any more than she was frightened already. 'According to the Bolsheviks, the two are not compatible.'

She wouldn't mind if he were coming too; she could face anything with him at her side, but no, he must take up arms for the White Army – as if they had a chance of winning! Why, even Pyotr Wrangel, who now commanded the White Army, was advising people to leave the country while they could. 'Misha,' she implored, jabbing the thread at the eye of the needle and missing. 'If we must go, then come with us. One man cannot make a difference, surely? In the general confusion you will not even be missed.'

'That would be desertion, Annushka. I cannot dishonour the name of Kirilov with such a shameful act. I begged leave to help you to escape, but that is all it is, a few days' leave.'

Anna made one more attempt to thread her needle and then tears overwhelmed her again. He took it from her and bent over the lamp to thread it for her, returned it to her, then sat down and picked up one of the pieces of jewellery from the velvet-lined casket on the table and began systematically to break the gems out of their silver and gold settings with wire-cutters.

'Do you really need to do that?' she asked, choking back another sob. Mikhail was adamant and tears were not moving him. 'It must be decimating their value.'

'Darling, pieces like this have no value in the new scheme of things, except for barter, and at the moment they are worth more as currency than the new paper money. Or even roubles. You will have to part with them one at a time for travel documents and food. And you will need to sell what is left to keep you going in England until I can join you.'

She sighed, picked up a ruby and sewed it carefully into a pair of stays she held on her lap. It was followed by another and then an emerald and a diamond. 'I shall be weighed down with it.' She attempted a laugh which tore at his heart.

'Put some in the children's clothes too. Lydia, sweetheart, go and fetch your best petticoat, the silk one with the lace flounces round the hem. And bring Andrei's best tunic too.'

Lydia scrambled out from under the table, followed by her brother. The ribbons had come out of her hair and Andrei's socks were wrinkled at the ankle. Both stood and watched their parents for a moment or two, then Lydia asked, 'Why are you breaking that necklace, Papa? Don't you like it anymore?'

'No, I don't think I do,' he said, taking a pair of pliers to a priceless antique, one that had been in the Kirilov family for generations. 'But we must hide the pieces from thieves, so Mama is sewing them into your clothes.'

'Why? Are we going on a journey?' Andrei asked, as Lydia disappeared on her errand, taking a stub of candle her father had lit for her.

'Yes, a very long journey,' his father told him. 'Over the sea to England.'

'England!' the boy exclaimed. 'I saw that in my atlas. It's the other side of the world. Why are we going there?' He was so like his father, especially his dark, intelligent eyes; looking at him made Anna's heart ache and she wanted to weep again.

'To be safe,' she told her son. 'Until this dreadful fighting is over and we can come back home.'

'I want to fight like Papa. I can shoot, you know I can. Didn't I bring down a hare the other day?'

'Yes you did, son,' his father told him. 'And a jolly good meal it made too, but shooting hares is not the same as shooting people and I pray to God you never have to do it.'

'You do.'

'I am a man and a soldier, that is different. It is not something I want to do.' He turned as Tonya, carrying the petticoat and tunic, came into the room with Lydia. She had been a roly-poly of a woman, almost as broad as she was high, though since the war the fat had melted off her and left folds of superfluous skin. 'Ah, Tonya, I am glad you are here,' he said. 'I will tell you our plans and if you have any suggestions to make I will listen.'

The countess, a little calmer now, continued to sew jewels into their clothes as he told of their plans. 'I am going to take the countess and the children to Yalta, where they will go on a ship across to Constantinople and from there to England,' he told her, smiling a little at her gasp of shock. 'You may go with them or not, as you please. I shall not insist.'

'But Your Excellency,' she said, addressing him in the old

way, forgetting she should not use that form of address now and she should have said Mikhail Mikhailovich. 'Where else would I be but with my babes? And the countess needs me.'

'Oh, thank you, Tonya,' Anna put in. 'I do not think I could bear it without you.'

'But how will we get away?' the servant asked. 'Someone is sure to see us and tell the *militsiia*.'

'We must leave separately and go in different directions. The countess and I will take the carriage to pay a visit to my cousin, Grigori Stefanovich. He is Chairman of the Workers' Committee of the Petrovsk Soviet and a visit to him will not be thought out of the ordinary. You will take the children in the droshky, as if you were taking Andrei to school, but you will not leave him there but go to Simferopol. We will meet you there and go to Yalta together.' He had considered sending them by train, but the trains, mostly made up of freight trucks, were packed with refugees, coming from further north, and they would never manage to get on one, even if they could obtain the necessary papers allowing them to travel.

'My parents live near Simferopol,' Tonya put in. 'You remember, Stepan and Marya Ratsin? They came on a visit. Years ago it was, before the war. We can take the children to them to wait for you.'

'Thank you, Tonya, if you are sure they will welcome them. It will only be for a few hours until the countess and I arrive.'

'Of course they will welcome them. The Reds haven't reached that far, have they?'

'No, Crimea is in White hands at the moment.' He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Though for how long, I cannot say.'

'Then the sooner we set off the better.'

'Tomorrow,' he said.

'Where will we get the extra horses?' Andrei demanded suddenly. 'We've only got old Tasha and she's a bag of bones.'

Mikhail smiled at his son, though it was more than a little forced. 'I have arranged to borrow one from the stationmaster.'

'You surely do not mean one of those great railway horses that help shunt the trucks?'

'Yes, there is nothing else to be had and I had to bribe Iosif Liberov with your mother's white fur coat even for that. Ivan will return the animal when you are safely away.' Then to Anna, who had been stitching busily the whole time, keeping her fingers on the move, trying not to think about what he was saying, 'Have you nearly done, Annushka?'

'There's just this big diamond left. You haven't taken it out of its setting.' She held up the jewel which was set in filigree silver in the shape of a star. The diamond in its centre was very big and glittered in the light from the lamp. Graded rubies, dark as blood, were set down the centre of each arm, the corners of which held a smaller diamond.

'It won't budge. We'll have to leave it like that. Can you put it in Lydia's petticoat?'

'I'll try.' She picked up her needle and the garment that Tonya had brought and set about concealing the star among its flounces. 'She had better wear the petticoat; it will be found in our luggage if that is searched.'

'We cannot take luggage, my love; remember we are only supposed to be going out for the day. We can put a couple of carpet bags under the seat of each carriage, but

no more. Wear all you can; you will need it anyway, the weather is bitter.'

'Mama, why are you doing that?' Lydia asked, watching her mother poke the gem into a false pocket she had made in the seam between the body of the garment and the flounce.

'We have to hide it, sweetheart. It is very valuable and bad men might try and take it from us if they know we have it. It is called the Kirilov Star. Did you know that?'

'No, I didn't. I can't remember seeing it before.'

'I don't suppose you have. I haven't worn it for a long time. Occasions for displaying such opulence have long gone. I do not know if they will ever come back. But you must take great care of it and show it to no one.'

'I won't.'

Mikhail sat down and drew his daughter onto his knee. 'You are my diamond, little one, the star of the Kirilovs and you must always remember that. Be good for Papa and help Andrei to look after your mother.'

Lydia rubbed her cheek against his tunic. He had discarded his wonderful scarlet and blue uniform with its gold braid for a plain tunic and wide leather belt, such as the better class of peasants wore. It was rough but strangely comforting. 'Aren't you coming with us, Papa?'

'Not right away. I shall join you later.' He kissed the top of her head and lifted her off his knee. 'Now off you go with Tonya and get ready for bed. You too, Andrei. We must all be up early in the morning.'

Anna kissed her daughter and hugged her son and it was not until they and their governess had disappeared that she burst into tears again. 'What is to become of us, Misha? Will we be parted for ever?'

'No, of course not.' He knelt beside her chair and took her hands in his own. 'You must not think like that, my dearest one. As soon as I can, I will join you. It will only be a few weeks, if that. No one among the Whites believes the war can be won, or that anything can return to what it was. Things have gone too far. When General Wrangel leaves, so will I, I promise you.' He bent forward and kissed her tear-wet cheek. 'Now, dry your eyes and come to bed. Tomorrow everything will look more rosy and you will be able to look forward to your new life. You must do it for the children's sake, let them see what a great adventure it is going to be.'

She gave him a watery smile. 'I shall try.'

But the next day could certainly not be described as rosy because it was snowing. Fat white flakes drifted down, swirling a little on the wind before settling on trees and rooftops and lastly on the lane that ran past the house. There was talk of postponing their journey but, according to Ivan, it would get worse before it got better, and if they were to go at all, they should go before it became too deep for the droshky. And what was more, he had heard gunfire in the night. It was still some distance away, but it heralded trouble. He had told his own family to take food and warm clothing into the cellar and shelter there if the fighting came to Petrovsk.

He was standing beside the carriage to which their old horse was harnessed, while the white flakes landed on their shoulders and decorated their fur hats. The vehicle was an ancient one with a soft retracting hood which Ivan had pulled up and which was already dotted with snowflakes. Before the war it had been used when the family came down for holidays, but had been laid up until they had arrived as

refugees in 1918. Since then they hardly dared take it out for fear of being accused of private ownership. If the Reds came, it would certainly be taken from them.

'You are right, of course,' Mikhail told Ivan, stamping his boot-clad feet. 'And I would not ask you to leave your family if I could manage without you, so the sooner we go, the sooner you will be back with them.'

'Yes, Your Ex—' He stopped suddenly, realising he should not have addressed the count in the old way. 'Yes, Mikhail Mikhailovich,' he corrected himself. 'When do you wish me to leave?'

'You must pretend to be taking Andrei to school and you have to take Lydia too because her mama and papa are out and there is no one to take care of her at home. The countess – I mean Anna Yurievna – and I are going now. We shall have to spend some time with Grigori Stefanovich and not appear to be in a hurry to leave, but he will give us safe conduct to travel. We can make use of that and will meet you at Tonya's home tomorrow evening. Tonya has assured me her father, Stepan Gregorovich, will welcome the children. I have given her enough money for you to stop at a hotel on the way.'

'Then I'll fetch the horse from the station and harness it up.' He wandered away, muttering that he didn't know what the world was coming to, with everything upside down and the wrong way round and he could see no good coming from any of it. He was certainly no better off under the new regime, and with the count and countess gone, how was he going to earn a living and feed his family?

The count turned and went back into the house.

Andrei and Lydia were sitting at the kitchen table eating *kasha*, a gruel made of buckwheat; Tonya was trying to

stuff more of Lydia's clothes into one of the bags and Anna was trying to decide whether she had room to take the icon from her bedroom. No one was talking. Anna looked up as he entered, brushing snow from his shoulders and sleeves. 'Well?'

'Ivan Ivanovich thinks we should press on before the snow becomes too thick and I agree with him. Are you ready?'

'Yes.' She knew it was not the snow he was concerned about so much as the approaching Red Army. She put the icon down. It was bulky and would take up more room in her bag than it deserved; after all, she could pray just as easily without it. She pulled on fur-lined boots, a coat made of the best sable and a hat to match. On top of that she put a thick shawl which she intended to discard for her visit to Grigori. 'I am wearing so many petticoats I feel like a dumpling,' she complained.

'You look beautiful,' he said, bending to kiss the tip of her nose. 'Now, does Tonya have her instructions?'

'I don't know. I forgot whether I told her to lock the bedroom door when they stop at the hotel tonight. You never know . . .'

'Countess, you have told me a hundred times,' Tonya put in. 'And you have told me what to order for supper and what to say to my parents and not to let Andrei out of my sight for a minute. As if I would! And Lydia is to wear all her petticoats and her warmest dress and the seal fur coat you made for her out of your old one . . .'

'I am sorry I am such a fusspot,' Anna said. 'Of course you know all that. And we shall be together again tomorrow night, so I do not know what I am worrying about. Come, children, sit with us a moment and then we must go.' They

all sat quietly as was the custom before undertaking a journey, but there was no time for lengthy contemplation of what lay before them and it was better not to think of it. Seconds later, she flung her arms about Andrei and hugged him so tight he squirmed to be free. 'Be good for Tonya and Ivan and look after your sister, won't you?'

'Course I will. I'm twelve, nearly a man.'

'So you are, and I am proud of you.' She reached for Lydia. 'Kiss me goodbye, little one, and then I must go. Papa is waiting.' She had managed to remain dry-eyed, but now the tears started to flow again. It felt as if she were saying goodbye to her children for ever, when it was not her children she might never see again, but her husband. Mikhail was going to see them all onto the boat at Yalta and then there would be real goodbyes. She must not think of that. She had two days to persuade him to travel with them; he had never refused her anything before and she could not believe that he would continue to hold out against her pleas. She brightened and kissed Lydia. 'Until tomorrow, my darling. Be good.' Then she drew on her gloves and picked up her muff and followed her husband out to where the carriage waited with the old horse in the shafts.

Tonya, Lydia and Andrei went to the door and watched as the count helped the countess into the carriage and tucked the rug about her before climbing onto the driving seat and flicking the reins over the rump of the old horse. It pricked up its ears and, with a jingle of harness, obeyed the command, 'Forward!' They stayed at the door watching and waving until the vehicle was out of sight, while the snow swirled about them and landed on the doormat.

Lydia was loath to move. She did not understand what

was happening, but seeing her mother cry had worried her. Mama was a grown-up and never cried. There was more to this trip than either of her parents had admitted. Why all the secrecy and the jewels sewn into their clothes and Mama and Papa going off separately? Papa had said they would be together again tomorrow, but something inside her, a huge dark lump in her breast, stopped her from breathing properly and frightened her.

'Come back inside, Lidushka,' Tonya said, taking her hand. 'They have gone. You can't see them anymore.' It sounded like a prophesy.

'Now, my cherubs,' she went on, drawing the children back indoors. 'We must get ready to go too. Go and make sure you have everything, while I pack some food to take with us. We shall have a picnic, eh?'

'In a snowstorm!' Andrei laughed, as he scampered up the stairs. He accepted what his father said without question and was treating the whole thing as a great adventure.

'Do you think we shall ever come back here again?' Lydia asked him as they reached the landing.

'Course we will, one day. This is our home. It has belonged to the Kirilovs for hundreds of years. One day it will be mine because I am the heir.'

Lydia looked about her at the carpets and curtains and her bed with its thick hangings to keep out the draughts, though now they were moth-eaten. She felt less sure than Andrei. Everything was changing, like summer suddenly ending and the snow starting, except that the snow would one day melt and spring would come again. But something in her bones, in her soul, told her that this was different and that the springs and summers to come would be nothing like those that had gone before, and it made her anxious.

'Hurry up!' Tonya called from the bottom of the stairs. 'Ivan Ivanovich is back and the droshky is at the door.'

Ivan had said goodbye to Sima and his children and now he was anxious to be off. They picked up the bags Tonya had packed for them and hurried down to the kitchen where Ivan was stamping the snow off his boots on the doormat. He took their bags from them and herded them out to the vehicle. The sight of it with a huge black carthorse in the shafts made Andrei giggle. 'Do you think you can make it gallop?' he asked Ivan.

'Let us hope we do not have to,' he said curtly, while he stowed the bags inside, lifted Lydia up and deposited her on the long fore and aft seat with her legs on either side, before turning to help Tonya up behind her.

'I'm going to sit behind you, Ivan Ivanovich,' Andrei said, moving the shotgun that lay on the seat and putting it on the floor at his feet.

'Do you think I should have fastened the shutters?' Tonya asked, looking back at the house.

'No, we do not want to let everyone know we are fleeing, do we?' Ivan said. 'Leave everything looking normal.'

'Normal!' She gave a cracked laugh as the big horse began to pull. It was used to shunting heavy engines and the droshky was feather-light by comparison. 'How can you say normal? I don't know what that means anymore. All this hole-and-corner stuff. You'd think we were criminals . . .'

'In the eyes of the Soviet, we are.'

They reached the end of the drive and turned south towards Petrovsk. It was only one straggling muddy street, lined with crooked wooden houses, which had thatched roofs and painted decorations around the doors and windows. The local Party headquarters on the square

was built of brick, and so was the library and the school which was on the far side of the town. The railway station was only a rough wooden building but it also housed the telegraph and post office. There were a few people about, all known to them, and they called out a greeting as they passed. 'Good day to you, Ivan Ivanovich,' they said, laughing at the plodding horse. 'What have you got there? A sledgehammer to crack a nut?'

'Andrei Mikhailovich must be taken to school,' he called back. 'And Mikhail Mikhailovich needed the carriage to visit Grigori Stefanovich on business.'

'What's wrong with their legs?'

'Nothing. It is snowing, or had you not noticed?'

'Pshaw, they should walk like the rest of us.'

Ivan did not answer but urged the horse to go faster to take them past the hecklers, but it was used to its own steady pace and ignored him. At the school, he drew up. 'Am I to go in?' Andrei asked.

'No, but we will pretend you have. Get out and run round to the back, then cross the field. I will be waiting the other side.'

'I never heard such nonsense,' Tonya said. 'For goodness' sake, can't we take the children where we like without all this fuss?'

'No, we can't. It's the count's orders. Off you go, Andrei, and don't stop to speak to anyone.'

Andrei believed every word his father had said and had no doubt they would meet at Tonya's parents' house and was unworried. 'I'm going with him,' the governess said, as he jumped down. 'I gave my word I would not let him out of my sight. If I'm stopped I shall say I have a message from Anna Yurievna for the teacher.'

Lydia was frightened and clung to Tonya's hand. 'You go on with Ivan Ivanovich,' Tonya said, gently disengaging herself. 'I shall only be a minute.'

She hurried after Andrei and Ivan moved on. He didn't like it, he didn't like any of it. If it were not for his long service to the count's family and the fact that the countess had always been good to his wife and children, he would have nothing to do with it. The Reds were getting closer all the time, and if they overran the area, he did not want to be labelled a Tsarist or a White, or any other name used to denote an enemy of the state.

The road wound round the field and passed through a small copse of birch trees. One or two shrivelled leaves still clung to the branches, but most made a grey-brown carpet on a land rapidly turning white. Once hidden from the town Ivan pulled up and before long Tonya and Andrei appeared. They clambered aboard and they were quickly on their way again.

They could hear the rumble of guns in the distance and away to their left a plume of smoke rose above a slight hill. The fighting was coming nearer, might already have reached Grigori Stefanovich's village which was only about eight *versts* distant from Petrovsk. He looked at Tonya and inclined his head in the direction of the smoke. 'Whose house do you think that is?'

'I don't know and we had better not wait to find out. You know the count's orders as well as I do. Tickle that horse into a trot, for goodness' sake.'

He did his best and the horse lumbered on, dragging the droshky after it as if it were trying to free itself from a troublesome fly. The country hereabouts had once produced good grain, wheat, barley and oats, but the war

against Germany had put an end to farming; the men had all been away fighting and the women who were left could not work the fields in the same way. When the war ended, the occupying Germans had left and their own men drifted back, but then came the Revolution and everything was confused and no one knew what they were supposed to be doing. Today, the rolling fields were covered in snow, and though the outline of the road was still just visible, a few more hours of bad weather and that, too, would disappear under a blanket of white.

'We should have harnessed the troika,' Tonya told Ivan.

'How could you, with only one horse?' Troikas, as a rule, were pulled by three horses but they could be harnessed with only two. 'Anyway, we are going south. If the snow turns to rain what good would a sleigh be?'

'Perhaps Papa and Mama will catch us up,' Andrei said. 'They will surely be going faster than this.'

'Perhaps.'

'When are we going to have our picnic?'

'Not yet,' Tonya said. 'Later we will find a shelter.'

'There is a wood ahead of us,' Andrei pointed out. 'There might be a woodman's hut.'

The road took them among the trees which, burdened by fresh snow, made the way dark as night. Most of the trees were conifers, but there were a few leafless deciduous trees. The last few berries which clung to them – orange rowanberries, wine-coloured elderberries, clusters of viburnum, some whitish, some purple – were being attacked by finches. Except for the creaking of the droshky the softly falling snow deadened all sound. Lydia shivered. 'I don't like it,' she said. 'It's like being shut in the cellar. I don't

want to stop here to have our picnic, even if we do find a hut.'

'Be quiet and listen!' Ivan said.

Lydia stopped speaking as the sound of galloping horses came to them from among the trees. Ivan did not wait to see who rode them, but whipped up their own animal into a lumbering gallop. The droshky swayed from side to side and they hung on grimly. Half a dozen horsemen burst from the trees onto the road behind them and one shouted for them to halt. Ivan ignored them. Tonya sat forward with her arms about Lydia, as gunshots spattered round them. 'You had better stop, Ivan Ivanovich,' she cried. 'Before they kill us all.'

His answer was to go faster. The horsemen, who seemed to think chasing them was a great joke, continued to fire at the ground around them, laughing and shouting and not bothering to catch them up, which they could easily have done. Before anyone could stop him, Andrei had grabbed the shotgun and stood up in the swaying carriage to return the fire. It was the worst thing he could have done. The chase stopped being a joke, and although Tonya reached up and tried to pull the boy down, it was too late; they were subjected to a hail of bullets, this time not aimed to miss.

Andrei and Tonya both fell backwards and landed awkwardly on Lydia who screamed and kept on screaming, as Andrei's blood spattered onto her face; she could even taste it on her lips. So much blood, sticky and black in the darkness of the forest, soaking her coat. Andrei did not speak, was incapable of speech. Tonya was groaning. Was some of the blood hers? Ivan looked back once and then urged the horses on, but the horsemen galloped up and surrounded them, forcing them to stop.

'Why didn't you stop when we shouted?' one of them asked, riding close to the carriage and peering inside. 'Who was it fired at us?'

'The boy,' Ivan said. 'He did not understand. He is only a child. He thought he was defending his sister.'

'Is he dead?'

'I do not know.'

'Get down and look, for God's sake, and stop that child screaming. You'll have the whole army down on our heads.' Which army he did not specify.

'She is frightened.' Ivan clambered down awkwardly, knowing that the men's guns were trained on him. He reached across and pulled Tonya off Lydia. Unable to sit up, the nurse slid to the floor. 'Be quiet, little one,' he told Lydia. 'You will only make the men angry if you scream.'

Her screams became frightened sobs, which she tried valiantly to hold back, but the sight of Andrei laying across her lap with his head thrown back and his eyes wide and staring was enough to set her off again. Her coat had fallen open and the blood was staining her white dress, soaking through to the petticoat, the petticoat containing the Kirilov diamond. She remembered her mother saying bad men might try and take it from her and she supposed that was who they were. Ivan lifted Andrei out and held him out in his arms, as if to show him to the horsemen, none of whom had dismounted. 'He is dead.' Ivan's voice was toneless.

'And the other? Who is she?'

He was about to say their governess when he realised that admitting the children had a governess was not a good idea; it branded them as aristocrats. 'A friend of the family. They were going to stay with her in Perekop while their parents went to Kiev. They have been summoned to appear

at some enquiry or other. I don't know the details.' The sight of Andrei, brave, foolish Andrei, had brought him near to tears himself and he could only mutter these untruths. 'Let me take them on, comrades. We are no danger to you. We have nothing you want. The boy did not mean any harm and he didn't hit anyone.'

The leader at last dismounted and came to look at Andrei, who was most certainly dead of a head wound. It had been a superb shot considering the smallness of the target and the fact that the droshky was travelling in a far from straight line; more of an accident than deliberate, if he were honest. 'You should have stopped him.'

'I couldn't. I was driving. Tonya Ratsina tried to stop him and she is badly wounded. Let us go, comrade. The little girl is terrified, can't you see?'

Lydia was no longer sobbing. She was staring with wide unblinking eyes at Ivan, who held her brother's body across his hands as if in supplication. Andrei's head lolled down one side, his legs down the other, unnaturally arched. She had always thought when people died they shut their eyes but Andrei's were wide open. Could he see her still? The man leant forward and closed the dead eyes with one hand and turned towards her. She opened her mouth to scream, but he quickly put his hand over her mouth. 'Silence, child! Your noise will not bring him back. I want to see the woman.' He reached down into the vehicle and lifted Tonya's chin. 'No beauty by any standards.' He let it fall, then picked up the picnic basket from the floor and flicked open the lid. 'Food, comrades,' he said, flinging chicken legs at them. They caught them deftly and began eating, obviously very hungry.

'Take it,' Ivan said. 'Take it, with pleasure. And the

pancakes. And the cold tea. Take it all. Just let us go.'

'We might. But who are you? Give us a name.'

'Ivan Karlov, cousin to Grigori Stefanovich, the Chairman of the Workers' Committee of the Petrovsk Soviet.' It was said without hesitation; he had had a few minutes to realise telling his own name would not help and could lead to his wife and children. He hoped using Grigori's name might influence the men for the good.

Tonya started to groan and cry out with the pain of her wound and both men turned to look at her. 'She needs help,' Ivan said.

'It's my view she is beyond help, but we do not make war on children. If the boy had not fired, you would be well on your way by now.'

'Why did you want to stop us?'

The man laughed. 'Our horses are spent, we thought we would requisition yours, but now we have seen that great carthorse, we have changed our minds. An unfortunate occurrence, comrade, but not our fault.' He reached into the carriage and picked up Tonya's purse. 'We will have this instead. Now, on your way.'

Ivan did not need telling twice. He laid Andrei on the floor the other side of Tonya and covered them both with rugs, then picked Lydia up and set her up in front of him, wrapping a fur round both their legs. It was done without speaking, without looking back at the horsemen, though he knew they were still watching him.