

AN EMPTY

SECRET

MIND IS A

LINDSAY SMITH

SAFE MIND



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*For Gwen,
who put the Russian enigma in my heart*



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A NOTE ON RUSSIAN NAMES

Russians have three names—a first name, a patronymic (like a middle name, but derived from their father's name), and a last name. The endings for the middle and last names differ for men and women, so a brother and sister, like Yevgenni and Yulia, would have different middle names derived from their father's name, Andrei: Yevgenni *Andreevich* Chernin and Yulia *Andreevna* Chernina.

In formal settings, Russians will address others by their first name and patronymic. In more familiar settings, Russians often address their friends, family members, and equals by a standard nickname of their given first name. The list below provides the nicknames encountered in this book.

FEMALE NICKNAMES

Anastasia—Anya

Antonina—Nina

Larissa—Lara

Maria—Masha

MALE NICKNAMES

Mikhail—Misha

Sergei—Seryozha

Valentin—Valya

Yevgenni—Zhenya

CHAPTER 1

MOSCOW, SEPTEMBER 1963

MY RULES FOR THE BLACK MARKET are simple. Don't make eye contact—especially with men. Their faces are sharp, but their eyes sharper, and you never want to draw that blade. Always act as though you could walk away from a trade at any moment. Desperation only leaves you exposed. Both hands on the neck of your bag, but don't be obvious about it. Never reveal your sources. And always, always trust the heat on your spine that haunts you when someone is watching.

I pass through the iron gates to the alley off New Arbat Street. A mosaic of Josef Stalin smiles down on the ramshackle market he never would have permitted. If he were still our leader, the man wearing strings of glass beads, snipping them off for customers, would vanish overnight. The little girl with jars of bacon fat would emerge years later in a shallow ditch, her skull half eaten by lye.

Comrade Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, the USSR's current leader, is content to ignore us. The Soviet Union provides everything

you need, as long as you don't mind the wait: a day in line for butter and bread rations, another day for meat, seven years for automobiles, fifteen for a concrete-walled apartment where you can rest between factory shifts. Khrushchev understands the stale-cracker taste of envy in every worker's mouth when a well-dressed, well-lived Communist Party official, more equal than the rest of us, strolls to the front of the ration line. If we quench our own thirst for excess in the black market, then that's less burden on the State. His KGB thugs only disrupt the market when we do something he cannot ignore—such as trading with known political dissidents and fugitives.

And I happen to be one.

A tooth-bare man lunges at me with an armful of fur coats. I don't want to know what creatures wore that patchwork bristly fur. "Not today, comrade," I tell him, straightening out my skirt. Today I must restock Mama's clinic supplies. (Average wait for a doctor's visit: four months. Average wait for a visit with Mama: three minutes, as she wrestles my brother Zhenya into another room.) The sour, metallic tang of fish just pulled from the Moskva River hits me and my stomach churns covetously, but I can only buy food with whatever's left over. We've lived off two food rations split five ways for some time now. We can live with it for some time more.

I spot the older woman I came for. Raisa, everyone calls her—we never use real names here. In this pedestrian alley, wedged between two disintegrating mansions from the Imperial days, we are all dissidents and defiants. We do not inform on each other for illegal bartering—not out of loyalty, but because doing so would expose our own illegal deeds.

Raisa's whorled face lifts when she sees me. "More Party goods for Raisa?" She beckons me into her "stall:" a bend in the concrete wall, shielded by a tattered curtain. "You always bring quality goods."

My chest tightens. I shouldn't be so predictable, but it's all I have to trade. The finer goods reserved for high-ranking Party members are worth their weight in depleted uranium here. I glance over my shoulder, hoping no one heard her. A boy and a girl—they look one and the same, with only a mirage-shimmer of gender to distinguish them—turn our way, but the rest of the market continues its haggling, lying, squawking. I let their faces sink into my thoughts in case I need to remember them later.

"Maybe you brought a nice filtered vodka? My boy, he wants a pair of blue jeans." Raisa ferrets through her trash bags. She still reeks of sweat from the summer months—not that I can criticize. I have to boil water on Aunt Nadia's stove to wash myself. "I have ointment for you, peroxide, gauze," she says. "You need aspirin? You always want aspirin. You get a lot of headaches?"

I don't like her making these connections, though for clinic supplies, I have little choice. If she knows about Mama's headaches, that's a weakness exposed. If she suspects we were Party members before we fled our home and became ghosts—

No. This is paranoia, gnawing at my thoughts like a starved rat. The KGB—the country's secret police and spying force—can only dream of training drills as thorough as my daily life, with all the ridiculous precautions I take. My fears are outweighed by one simple truth: I need something and Raisa needs something, and that will keep us safe.

Capitalism is alive and well in our communist paradise.

“Pocket watch.” I hold Papa’s watch by its twisted silver chain. “Painted face commemorates the forty-year anniversary of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” My voice falters as memories of Papa ripple through me: He clicks it open, checks it, exhales a plume of smoke, tucks it in his coat, and turns back to the snow-slashed streets. “Wind it once a month and it’ll run forever.” I drop the watch in Raisa’s palm, happy to bid those memories farewell.

“Not bad. Expensive . . .” She bounces it in her hand, as if checking its weight. “But is it so practical? It will be forty-six years since the revolution this November. Outdated, yes?”

I wince. Has Papa been gone for five years? I turned seventeen last month, but there was no extravagant celebration like when we were favored in the Party. I’ve forgotten the taste of sugar frosting, the sound of wrapping paper tearing apart. I passed my birthday as I had the last four, keeping Mama and Zhenya hidden while I pawned away our history.

“Then it’s a collector’s item.” I must be careful when defending an item’s value. I’ve seen too many others expose their past or reveal their emotions when justifying a high price, but that’s giving valuable information away. I must tell her only what she needs to hear. An empty mind is a safe mind, Papa always said.

Raisa nods, but looks unconvinced. Now we play the games of the market that can’t be written into rules. Gauging your trading partner, assessing their offer, luring out what they really want and need. Knowing when to reveal what else you have to trade, and when to keep it hidden.

And I am better at this than most.

I move for the watch as if to take it back, but my fingertips

linger against her skin. *Concentrate, Yulia*. In the moment when our skin touches, time shatters apart, like the world is run by a loose watch spring. I plunge into the emptiness, the silence around me, and when I surface from it I'm inside Raisa's thoughts.

She can turn a huge profit on the ointment—castoffs from the factory, because the formula was off. The peroxide cost her too much—a kilo of pork, and it was fresh, too. Raisa wants compensation. And me, always turning up with rich Party goods that raise too many questions when Raisa tries to sell them off—

I fall back into the void and thrash toward myself, and time winds back up to speed. I finish snatching the watch back and narrow my eyes.

“I don't want your ointment. I heard about the factory mishap. You thought I didn't know the formula was off?”

Raisa's jaw droops, the wart on her chin wobbling.

“You're not the right person for these goods,” I say. “I'll look for someone who knows the value of Party items. Someone unafraid.” I sling the bag over my shoulder and turn to leave.

“No—please, wait—” Her Baba Yaga witch-nails catch my sweater. The brief contact isn't enough for me to slip into her thoughts, but I sense her emotions in that touch: panic, fear, and . . . loyalty. She will not turn me in.

How do I explain this ability I have? It must be something everyone does, unknowingly. Mama's textbooks say our sight and hearing are not such dominant senses as we believe. We smell others' emotions and taste their weaknesses. Me, I've found out how to focus thoughts and memories through touch, like steadying a radio antenna with your fingertips, the static sloughing off until a clear melody remains.

Or maybe, like my paranoia, I'm only imagining.

"Then let's talk seriously." I yank open my bag. "Keep your ointment. I want double the aspirin, and the gauze . . ."

Warmth spreads along my back. The discomfort we feel when being watched—another intangible sense. Through a tear in Raisa's curtain, I get a better look at the twin boy and girl, russet halos of hair catching the afternoon sun, with matching disgusted expressions for their matching clothes. Their matching, *expensive* clothes. My nails split the bag's burlap fibers. Only junior members of the Communist Party—Komsomol, the youth wing—could dress so well.

"What's the matter, girl?" Raisa leans toward the curtain. "If you've brought the KGB to me . . ."

The twins' gazes flit around the market like flies but keep returning to me. They duck under a cage of rabbits hung from the rafters, and glide toward us like Siberian tigers on the hunt. My blood is molten in my veins. The gnawing paranoia urges me to run, run, escape their doubled stare, run where their stiff new shoes can't follow. But what if I'm wrong? What if they aren't here for me, or only recognize me from my old life?

"Yulia Andreevna." The girl twin speaks my real name from lips that have never felt the rasp of winter. "Too easy. You don't even make it fun."

Raisa's curtain tears down easily in my grip. I swing its rod into the girl's face. She's caught off guard, but the boy twin's hand is there to catch it, like he already knew what I would do. I'm running, leaping over a stack of fabrics from the southern republics, shoving a bucketful of handmade brooms behind me to block the path.

“You can’t run from what you are!” the boy shouts.

I chance a look over my shoulder. Yakov slows the twins, jabbing his box of rusty nails in their faces, but they disentangle from his sales pitch and knock over a little boy with bundled twigs. Who are they? Old schoolmates eager to turn in our family? I’ve cut all ties to our old life—we had to shed those snakeskin memories.

Vlad, the unofficial market guard, stands between me and the wrought-iron gate. I duck around him, but Aunt Nadia’s shoes are a little too big on me and I skid to the side, losing my balance. He seizes the collar of my sweater in his fist. “You bring trouble, comrade?”

I wriggle out of the sweater and launch myself through the gates. My arms immediately prick with gooseflesh; it’s too cold for just a blouse. But I have to ignore it. I have to reach Mama and make sure she’s safe.

“You’ll be sorry!” the girl twin screeches at me as I run past afternoon workers, shuffling out of the Metro stop. If I duck my head and keep my eyes to myself, they’ll provide the perfect camouflage. “Don’t you want to know what you are?”

What I am? I climb down the escalator slowly enough that I don’t raise suspicion. My ratty clothes are lost in the sea of gray-brown-blue. Just another half-starved waif with empty eyes and empty hands. I know just what I am.

I am Yulia Andreevna Chernina, seventeen years old, daughter of former high-ranking Communist Party members. I am a fugitive in my own country. And sometimes I see things that can’t be seen.

CHAPTER 2

OUR SHELL-SHOCKED TANK of a neighbor lumbers toward me on the walkway, stinking of potato vodka and sleeplessness. I don't like the way his eyes pull from mine, like a magnetic repulsion. It's a guilty act, one I can't afford to ignore right now. Like the market, I need every advantage. As he brushes past me, I tighten up my mind—tuning that imaginary radio—and am thrown into his skin.

We are no longer standing in front of 22 Novaya Rodina, where the all-new apartment towers already look beaten and cowed. We are outside Lubyanka Square earlier this morning, standing in the bronze-cast shadow of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the father of the KGB, the secret police who tell us how to act, who to be. I peer out of the neighbor's eyes at a KGB officer in a mud-green coat who is smiling just enough to show the edge of his teeth. The officer scribbles in his notebook and says *How long have the Chernins been hiding there?*

This is the traitor, this neighbor who has reported us to the

secret police, sentencing what's left of my family to death—for what? A bit of spending money? The twins at the market were no accident, though they didn't look like the usual KaGeBeznik thugs.

The officer lowers his notepad and jams his fist into a pocketful of worn-out rubles. *We have been looking for them for some time, you know.* The wad of notes dangles below my neighbor's nose. *The Chernins are dangerous people. You were right to come to us.*

I should have known, but there's no time to berate myself—or even this scum—so I fall back into the present and rush past him on the walk, thoughts of Mama pulling me toward the building.

Our building hangs over me as I rush up the too-long walk. It's made of giant concrete slabs cantilevered into place as if by magic—a Stonehenge for the people, the worker, the State. When Khrushchev first built them, the workers were thrilled to leave the old roach-rotted, subdivided mansions that housed three families to a room. But to me, the building is our prison—I only leave it for the market or for a breath without four other bodies pressed against me. The rest of the time, my caged-animal stare could peel the lead paint from the walls. That girl dared to ask me what I am? I am the weed growing through the sidewalk's cracks, resilient, but knowing I'll someday be ripped out by the root.

I have to warn Mama. I don't know how long I've lost the twins for, if I've lost them at all. I don't know how many are with them. As I fumble with my key, I strain for the soft fall of boots on cement of a team sneaking around me, guns trained.

But there is only me, with every instinct coiled in my genes screaming to save my family.

The elevator button clicks; an electrical current travels lazily down its wire, gears whirl, and the car yawns as it descends, as if it can't believe it must haul yet another person to the tenth floor. My nerves play a scale up and down my spine as the car jerks upward, rattling my teeth, the light of each floor drifting too slowly past the door's crack.

Can I trust this strange sight of mine, or is hunger and a five-year weariness in my bones confusing me? Maybe my head is just finding images it likes and stitching them together into patchwork paranoia. My parents are scientists—I don't believe anything that can't be proved. But it's been right too many times for me to doubt.

I reach the door to Aunt Nadia's apartment. Like the others in the antiseptic hall, it is black and densely padded, like we're in an asylum and can't be trusted with sharp, bright things. Unlike them, however, ours stands ajar. That little crack of air that should not be. My heart hides in my throat.

Sunlight dapples the front room, but it looks false, like someone's shaken an old, stale bottle of springtime and let it loose. No one sits on the bench, reading Gogol or trying to quiet the hunger that follows us as surely as our shadows. Only my gaunt reflection fills the foyer mirror, frazzled black hair escaping from its braids. Mama's coat hangs from the high hook with Zhenya's miniature one beside it; Aunt Nadia's and Cousin Denis's are gone.

It's four in the afternoon, the time I always walk Zhenya through the neighborhood, though I hate how predictable it makes us. It's hard to avoid routine with a brother who requires

order the way some plants require a wall to anchor them. He'd have a fit if we didn't go, or worse, crumple up inside of himself and refuse to unfurl for the rest of the night. I open my mouth to call for him but can't force the words out into the open.

I turn to the kitchen on my left, just past the washroom and the water closet. A cup of tea steams, abandoned, on the table. An issue of *Pravda* lies open beside it: "Khrushchev Promises Moon Landing by 1965." Vladimir Vysotsky croons one of his safe, tepid folk ballads through the AM radio, Aunt Nadia's prized possession that cost her more rations than she'll ever admit. She can't be so impulsive with us around. Each ration must stretch until it snaps to feed Mama and Zhenya and me.

Maybe, I think desperately, Mama went to lie down with another of her headaches. Perhaps a patient showed up, and they're all crammed into Nadia's old bedroom that we share. Perhaps she stepped across the hall to chat with neighbors, safe neighbors, neighbors who would never surrender us to the KGB—

I stop with my hand resting on the bedroom doorknob, my extra sense wiping memories from it like a layer of dust. The scream that I cannot unleash burns back into my lungs, ripping through me in search of escape.

In my mind, I see the other side of the door. Two men hold Mama and Zhenya as if they are dolls. Hands clamped over their mouths, they are motionless, waiting. A third man flattens against the wall beside the door, wedged in that narrow pass between our fold-out bed and the cabinet full of molding Tolstoy and medical journals. He will grab me as soon as I walk in.

I nudge the door with my shoe and jump back.

Silence, dusty and dense. I barge into the room, but it's empty

and still. I'm too late. The memory is just that—come and gone, and with it, my family. Tears burn in the corners of my eyes. I trusted my sense, and it failed them. I've failed.

Something flutters against the smoke-stained curtains.

A woman—she wears the same mud-green uniform as the KGB officer on Lubyanka Square—steps down from the balcony. Her hair is dyed the riot-red that every Russian woman over forty sports these days; it's styled in an overgrown bob that does no favors to her sagging shape.

“Yulia Andreevna Chernina.”

My name hangs between us as we study each other. She might have been beautiful ten years ago, she might have had the endless lashes and silver screen lips of Tatiana Samoilova for all I know, but the weight of her deep frown appears to have recast her face. She folds her hands behind her back. She's physically unimposing, but the spark in her eye betrays a mind that never stops churning. I've seen that spark before. The superior spark of informers, spies, politicians—anyone smart enough to use you for all you're worth.

“Daughter of Andrei and Antonina Chernin.” Her eyes narrow. “Sister to Yevgenni—”

Yevgenni—Zhenya. My brother, whose own thoughts turn against him if his supper's five minutes late. “Where is he?” I ask. “And Mama? What have you done with them?”

She smiles, though her face fights to hold the frown in place. An old gypsy song floats through the room like a breeze. Something about lost love, crying-in-your-vodka folk music; it must be Nadia's radio still, but the music sounds watery, like it's soaking into my skin.

“Your mother and brother will be safe, but I require your cooperation, Yulia.” She smiles—the confident smile the twins in the market wore. The smile of someone who holds all the cards, when their opponent doesn’t even know the game’s rules. She takes a step toward me, lamplight slithering off the edges of her brass military emblem. “It’s time to show you what you really are.”

I step back, but two men have appeared behind me. Their leather gloves are cold on my skin. I buck against them as they wrangle my arms behind my back. “Mama!” I scream. “What have you done with them?”

They yank me from the doorway. If I were stronger, perhaps I could break free, but I’m weak from too few rations and too many years of unfocused fear. They press a rag against my mouth, and the last thing I see is our old family photo with Mama and Papa smiling right at me before I’m lost in endless black.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD, I read about an experiment where biologists took silver foxes and bred the friendliest, most docile specimens to determine if domestication could be genetically inherited. In just a few generations, they'd produced playful, calm foxes that wanted to cuddle up to human beings and looked to them for happiness, like pet dogs.

The experiment was written up in one of Mama's professional journals, back when she practiced medicine, before we went into hiding. I'd always been enamored of genetics, which had been Mama's specialty before joining Papa in developmental psychology research, and something in this experiment strummed the right chord in me. I'd ramble about it to anyone unlucky enough to let me corner them. I dreamed of attending the Mendeleev Genetics Institute at Moscow State University, where Mama and Papa met, and researching a cure for the storm of thoughts inside my brother's head.

I read every book about genetics and biology that I could find, forever lugging around books that unbalanced my eight-year-old frame. But I was not satisfied; I was desperate to fix my brother and his growing fits of fear. And so, in the meadow behind our dacha, our summer cabin in Kazan, I tried to catch and breed some foxes of my own.

The only thing I ever caught was a raccoon, and when I lifted up the seething, chattering cardboard box, he flew from it and latched on to me, a ball of claws and desperation. Mama snuck me into the laboratory where she and Papa worked—past the patrolling soldiers with AK-47s—to get a rabies shot immediately, instead of waiting at the state hospital. I didn't understand why their clinic had armed guards, but I realized, then, that my parents' work was perhaps not as straightforward as I thought.

But I kept dreaming of the Mendeleev Institute. I spent months formulating my strategy—everything in the Soviet Union is a system, a game, and you must learn the system's rules. I devoted myself to earning perfect marks in biology. Papa only offered his constant platitudes; “An empty mind is a safe mind,” he'd say, though I wanted to fill my head with knowledge until it overflowed. After he left, and we went into hiding, Mama swore she'd help me find a way to attend. We would craft another identity for me to slip into, much like unbeknownst to Mama I was now learning to slip into others' skin.

There was a second part to the fox experiment that I didn't like to think about. In addition to breeding the friendliest creatures for domestication, the scientists bred the aggressive foxes

together as well. For years those raging monsters, similar to the raccoon I'd caught, invaded my nightmares, striking at the cage wire, ready to attack the moment a person came near. When I joined the program, I told myself, I would do away with that part of the experiment.

CHAPTER 4

THE TILED INTERROGATION ROOM could double as a grade school sports equipment closet or a changing room for the community pool—there's that lingering musk of sweat and bleach and the rusty drain in front of the wooden chair that I've been bound to. But I know the real reason for the smell, the drain, the walls so easy to hose down. These are the sorts of closets dissenters get lost in, never to be found again. In my cotton-mouthed, sluggish waking, I fight to keep my wrists from settling on the chair's wooden arms. I'm not in control of myself enough to keep from slipping into past prisoners' battered skin.

When the door opens, it's the red-haired KGB officer, clicking along the floor in black pumps with only a sly wink of a heel. The door shuts behind her and I catch a whiff of her weary body odor. I hope it's been days since she slept; I hope her daring mission to capture me, a fearsome unarmed, half-starved teenager, has kept her from showering and eating. I don't want to be the only prisoner here.

“You know why you are here.” She steps toward me, close enough that I could punch her if my hands weren’t tied.

I hold her gaze and don’t answer. Anything I might say could be used as an admission of guilt. I’m better off saying nothing and thinking even less. Whatever happens, I must play this like the market game: carefully, controlled.

“Your parents are Andrei and Antonina Chernin.” Air whistles through her front teeth, which I notice are bent inward, when she says our last name. “Both are wanted for political subversion and theft of state property.”

The theft part is news to me, but I don’t let it show. She lifts one eyebrow. Icy fingers of panic worm into my lungs. Why is she looking at me that way? A wisp of weepy gypsy music runs through my mind. In my foggy logic, I suppose she wears that music like others wear perfume.

“You are not troubled by these crimes? Perhaps you do not understand their seriousness.”

“I understand what you do to people who commit them,” I say.

She tightens her lips and *hmmms*. “Your family is already in my custody. It would be so easy, very easy, for you to help them out of this unfortunate situation. I only need for you to cooperate.”

“You don’t have *all* my family.”

I clamp my teeth down on my tongue. I shouldn’t have revealed that. But Papa is safe, Mama swears it; she just won’t tell me where. *An empty mind is a safe mind*, he would say. I can’t help thinking of the last time I saw him. Scarf wrapped tight at his throat; steel-rimmed glasses fogging as he steps into the cold.

“Do you know this for a fact?” she asks, pacing away from me.

We're both fighting to keep our faces blank. Like the market, it's a game of getting what you want without paying a price that can't be counted in rubles. But she's had her whole career to master this art.

Think, Yulia. Everything is a system, and systems can be learned. Figure out the rules for her game. She's not asking any questions. Isn't that the whole point of interrogation? She mentioned cooperation—

"I'm not asking questions because I know everything I need to know from you. You are not here for what you know, but what you can do." Her hands curl into fists, making her leather gloves creak.

I stare at her, shock momentarily numbing my resolve to keep quiet. "Did you just—"

"—read your mind?" she asks, and her smug smile is like a liter of vinegar in my gut. "Did I? You tell me."

"I'm not telling you anything until I see my family." I try to sound confident, casual. But I can't erase the memory of the empty apartment, their coats still hanging up.

"I will offer you the next best thing." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a necklace, dangling it before me by its chain. The clasp is broken and bits of black hair are snarled in the links, as if it were ripped from someone's neck. I recognize the medallion spinning at the end of the chain: an emblem of Saint George slaying the dragon.

My mother's necklace.

"It could be anyone's." I tilt my head away. "Lots of Russians pray to Saint George."

She holds the necklace in front of my bound left hand. “But you can prove that it is hers. Go on—touch it.”

Does she mean what I think she does? The medallion spins back and forth, the image on one side flickering like a zoetrope. She can’t possibly mean my little trick, my market strategy. My funny extra sense that shows what I shouldn’t see. I stretch my fingers toward the pendant.

No, no, this is my secret. I can’t possibly share it with the KGB.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, my fear making the words soupy.

“You want to keep her safe, yes?” Her eyes narrow. “Your brother Yevgenni. I know he has some . . . mental concerns. His condition requires extra attention, I am told. I will need to justify such care to my superiors.”

“You can’t hold him in a cell. I need to be with him.” I strain at the bindings. “He needs to follow his routine—”

“Why do you think they are in prison cells?” She waves her hand before her face as if waving away the very words. Or her bad breath. “They are cared for. But you want this care to continue, do you not? And so I require something in return. Come now, Yulia.” She sighs. “You barter all the time. You know how this works.”

I grind my teeth together because they’re the only thing between her face and a wad of spit right now. This isn’t an interrogation—it’s a sales pitch. “What could you possibly want from me? I’m not a political criminal or—or any of those things you say my parents are. I’m just a girl.”

Her chapped lips pull back into something like a smile. “Yulia, but we both know that isn’t true. You aren’t *just* anything.”

I squirm away from that awful smile. My wrist brushes the chair arm, and there's a candle-flicker memory of terrifying pain—but it is quickly, mercifully gone. “No. I'm just another person you've chosen to harass. You want to arrest me over things my parents have done? Careless things they might have said?” I roll my shoulders. A Russian shrug, a dismissal, a shifting of blame—*What do you want from me, this is just how things are.* “You'd have to imprison the whole country if that's such a crime.”

Her gaze drifts away from me, and she stands perfectly still, like she's watching a memory. “You see things sometimes,” she says, suddenly somber. “Things that can't be seen.”

I stop squirming around.

“You think it's your imagination, or a phantom déjà vu. Sometimes it appears to come true, but not enough to make you believe. Coincidence. Anything more would be searching for patterns where there are none,” she says.

I realize that my mouth is hanging open, and I hurriedly shut it. She can't possibly know about that. I barely believe it myself.

“Do you ever think about these occurrences? Do you ever wonder if there is a power behind them?”

I shake my head. A word comes to me to describe my trick sometimes, but it seems like a castoff of our superstitious past. The realms of magic, religion, mysticism—things beyond the laws of science—died in a dank basement with the last emperor. Bullet to the brainpan—flatten these outdated beliefs with tank treads.

“*Psychic.* That's the word you're looking for,” she says.

I don't like the way she's looking at me: her smile is too

genuine, too familiar. I jerk my head away and stare at the tile wall. I can see my reflection in it, but it's blunted, all shadow and light.

"Touch the necklace—see for yourself that it's your mother's. I know you can do this." She holds it out to me again, Saint George dancing on the end of the chain. "See through it to the past it contains."

I curl my hands into fists; my nails burrow into my palms. She is guessing wildly, or making things up. "Who are you?" I ask.

"I represent the First Chief Directorate for the Committee of State Security—"

"Committee of State Security—" *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*—"KGB, I know that much," I say.

She sighs—delicate, measured—and stuffs the necklace back into her pocket. "My name? Why don't you try to see it for yourself?"

I look back at her with my eyebrows furrowed.

"It's very simple. You look at me, and then you imagine stepping inside."

"You—you want me to read your thoughts." I squeeze my eyes shut before she can nod. "No. It's not possible—"

"Yulia. I know all about your ability." She chuckles. "You're quite easy to read, yourself."

That slams my heart into my throat. My eyes fly open like she's thrown cold water on me. "You can't really mean—"

"You have a skill. Others, like me, have similar skills—but none quite like yours. So you will work for me, and I will help

you refine it.” This time when she smiles, the patient motherly look is completely gone, and all that’s left are her cold, animal teeth bared at me in dominance. “Otherwise, as you know—we have ways of dealing with people who commit crimes against the State.”

CHAPTER 5

THE COVERED TRUCK BED SMELLS like rotted cabbage and wilted lettuce. The soldier on the bench across from me holds an AK-47 across his lap, casually, like it is no more threatening than a walking cane; but his eyes are unlit matches, and his arms, his steady fingers, are full of energy waiting to be unleashed. He is potential; he is a threat. But when our knees bang together, I get a whiff of his thoughts—the kielbasa sandwich awaiting him for lunch and the nightclub dancer awaiting him for dinner. He isn't plotting my execution just yet, and I mean to keep it that way.

My red-haired interrogator, Comrade Major Lyubov Grigorievna Kruzenko, says I'll be living with six other teenaged children who are, she claims, like me. (I tried plucking her name from her mind, as she asked, but she was sitting across the room from me. I heard nothing save anguished cries muffled through concrete.) She is our instructor as psychic spies. She drilled me for two hours in the interrogation room until I could

read her thoughts without direct contact, her face looming directly before mine with a thin, too-satisfied grin. As our instructor she'll help us develop our skills to eventually work for the KGB as psychic spies. Classes, field trips, meals—she makes it sound like the Komsomol summer camps I attended as a little girl, but I think of the Siberian gulags instead—the life-sentence permafrost prisons. For there is a steep price to pay if I disobey; I must play along to keep Mama and Zhenya safe.

But no one can bend the rules quite like me.

The truck takes a sharp turn and slows to a stop. Someone unlatches the back for us. The soldier stands, hunched over, and prods me with the butt of his rifle. I shoot him a frosty look. We hop down into a bland, pathetic courtyard overrun with weeds and surrounded by high concrete walls. Razor wire frosts the top of the walls, softened by a fine dusting of snow.

I try to gauge the walls' height. The razor wire doesn't scare me, not if I'm bundled up for winter already. A few cuts and scrapes. The blood trail I'd leave behind could be a problem. I scan the courtyard, but it's thick with armed guards.

Careful, Yulia. Your mind isn't a safe hiding place anymore. I push down thoughts of escape as Major Kruzenko marches our way.

"Come, come," she calls to me, holding out her hand like I'm a schoolgirl who needs to be herded everywhere. I wrap my arms around my chest—the scratchy white blouse, sweater, and wool skirt she gave me aren't nearly warm enough for late September—and stomp past her. We round the truck and I stare up. And up.

The building is an old Georgian-style mansion—the sort

that once housed princes and countesses, those long-extinct fairy-tale creatures. The walls are robin's-egg blue, though the plaster has chipped in places to show its gray flesh. White stones scale the corners and windows; the slate roof billows and peaks over three stories. Rusty water stains trail from window corners like tears, and cracks spider up the façade. Someone has taken a chisel and hammer to the frontispiece above the entryway, marring the old Romanov seal of a two-headed eagle—the symbol of the imperial family before the Communist Party took over.

“The house is yours to roam.” Major Kruzenko opens the front door. No lock, no electronic callbox, just a heavy wooden door, its carved face worn smooth. It creaks when it opens—not a good escape route. “Your room is on the third floor, with the other girls. Take some time to get acquainted with everyone. We’ll start our lessons for the day soon.”

The stench of mold overwhelms me as we enter the dark foyer. A chandelier hangs overhead, but it’s been stripped of its crystals; only half of the fake candles screwed into its sockets are lit, and all are capped in dust. Wood planks squeal and shift beneath us. The grand staircase ascends into darkness, its marble steps sagging in the center, worn down by decades of feet.

“Yeah, it’s a shithole.”

I whirl to my right. A blond boy leans against a nearby doorway, watching me like he might watch a pigeon at the park: with bored indifference. Then he hoists his head high, showing off his chiseled everyman face. I know it from countless Stalin-era murals, the kinds slathered across Moscow as tribute to the Communist state: muscle-bound factory workers with a perfect curl of hair in the center of their foreheads and chins that could

hammer rivets into place. My gut does a quick gymnast tumble, and I don't even *like* blonds.

"Never hurts to try." He laughs to himself.

I stare at him. "Try what?"

Major Kruzenko cuts him off before he can answer. "Sergei, since you are here, would you please show Yulia Andreevna around before class?"

"Sure." He shoves off the doorway with his foot and stretches to his full height. He's a beast. Hulking shoulders, thighs like tree trunks—and it's all muscle, over two meters of it. "Hockey," he says, casting a glance at me over his shoulder. "I was going to play for Spartak before . . ." His gaze slides toward Major Kruzenko, and he trails off.

"Sergei Antonovich!" Major Kruzenko's voice is piercing as icicles. "Stop reading the poor girl's mind."

My cheeks instantly flush. I can't let my thoughts stray for a moment here. But the more I look at Sergei, the more I'm compelled to think everything about him that I wouldn't want him to hear me think. Horrible things that I *wouldn't* think otherwise, if I weren't worried about him overhearing—

"It's all right." He smiles at me, and it feels like the sun's rays slipping around dense clouds. The sun? I'm comparing some smug boy's grin to the sun? *Bozhe moi*, Yulia. "The less you want to think of something, the harder it becomes to think of anything else."

"Wonderful," I mutter.

"It'll get better." He leads me through the archway. "First stop: our extensive library."

Near-empty bookshelves grin back at us like a toothless old

babushka. “I thought we’re taking classes here?” I glance at a few of the titles—all Leninist-Marxist political theory, economic dissertations proving the perfectness of the Communist system, historical accounts of the Great Patriotic War against fascist Germany (Uncle Stalin did not believe “World War II” adequately described our quest for revenge). The bookshelves are hairy with dust.

Sergei shrugs. “It’s not that sort of school.”

“Then what sort of school is it?” I try to match his lazy half-smile, but it feels wrong, like a too-tight boot.

“Spycraft, mostly.” He looks away from me. “We’re training to join the psychic operations wing of the KGB. We use our skills to monitor the Americans and hunt down traitors.”

Like me, I think.

“I’m a remote viewer, myself. I can see inside places without going to them. I’ve never met someone with your particular power. Reading thoughts and memories through touch?”

“A lot of good it did me,” I say. But maybe I can turn it to my advantage still. If I can find out where Mama and Zhenya are being kept . . .

“I suggest you take it easy,” Sergei says, though I’m not sure if he’s answering my thoughts or not. *Bozhe moi*. It hurts my head to contemplate it. “Hey, Boris,” he adds, to the lanky uniformed man in the corner of the room. I hadn’t even noticed him. Boris makes no acknowledgment, but his eyes follow Sergei, and as we approach another doorway, Boris glides along behind us. “He’s my pet spider,” Sergei explains. “Anytime I think I’m alone, he comes spinning down on his web.”

“Do we all have—er, pet spiders?” And can they read minds

as well? Have they heard me thinking about escape? My chest tightens.

Sergei chuckles. “You’ll have one you know by name. It’s the ones they change around you have to watch out for. Right, Boris?”

Boris grimaces and positions himself in the doorway.

We enter a cavernous, window- and mirror-lined room that must have hosted balls in the Imperial days. Velvet ropes dangle from the ceiling, bereft of their chandeliers like leashes missing their dogs; channels on the walls that once housed gold leaf have been stripped bare. The bank of windows looks onto a desolate stone terrace along the house’s side, full of weedy flowerbeds and dry, leaf-smeared fountains. The same high concrete walls from the front yard block the rest of the view. I curse under my breath as a pair of guards patrol through the yard. Missile silos have less security than this.

At the far end of the ballroom, someone plays a soft Tchaikovsky waltz on a battered baby grand. The piano isn’t as out of tune as I’d expected. Two teens waltz around the piano: a boy and girl, slender without looking starved, with soft brown hair and matching French noses. I suck in my breath—the twins from the market. They’re dressed in far nicer wool and cashmere than the scratchy tweed and cotton on Sergei and me. Little crescents of perspiration lurk under their arms as they twirl, carefree, smug.

“Misha? Masha?” Sergei calls. “Our twins,” he tells me. Of course their names match—I can’t help but grin at their parents’ cruelty. “Though I believe you’ve already met.”

My jaw tenses and I manage a curt nod. I can’t think about anything around them. Nothing is safe.

Misha—or Mikhail, I assume—saunters toward us. “The little trapped rat. Not worth the effort, if you ask me.”

“If you were dumb enough to get caught, you have no place here,” Masha says.

“Then what’s your excuse?” I ask.

Masha eyes me with sudden wolfish dominance. “How long have you known you were a psychic? You’re not a very good one. I mean, you didn’t even see us coming.”

I shrink back from her, which I realize a second too late is about the worst thing I could have done. “It took you five years to find me. What’s that say about you?”

Masha scrutinizes me for a minute more. The piano music has stopped. She breaks the gaze first; relieved, I lower my head and stare at the decades of scuffmarks gouged into the floor. It doesn’t matter, these people don’t matter. As soon as I find out where Mama and Zhenya are, I can leave this all behind, and—

Shit.

Masha’s face lights up, triumphant. “You can scheme all you want. You won’t get far.” She wrinkles her perfect nose, glancing toward the piano. “No one ever does.”

Sergei nudges my shoulder with his own, though he has to stoop down to do it. “Just ignore them. I do.”

Misha jabs his thumb toward Sergei, eyes still on me. “You think this hockey hooligan will protect you? I used to think I couldn’t read Sergei’s thoughts until I realized he didn’t *have* any.” He shares a smirk with Masha and they strut out of the ballroom.

“Can you believe they actually want to do this work? I figure that’s punishment enough.” Sergei’s face is flushed, but he keeps his half grin lacquered to his face. “Come on, tour isn’t over.”

We circle the piano, revealing a dark-featured boy seated at it, hands steady as a surgeon's above the keys, as if stopping the music has frozen him, too. Sergei sighs and leans against the splintering piano. "And this is Valentin."

Valentin's deep cherry-pit eyes watch me from behind thick-framed glasses; he nods once at me and scrubs his black hair. He has a large frame like Sergei's, but his muscles are lean and withdrawn. Something about him reminds me of the brooding photographs of Russian composers and poets in Aunt Nadia's encyclopedias.

"You play very well," I tell him. "Was that Tchaikovsky?"

He looks down like the compliment was too much to bear. "It was supposed to be *Swan Lake*, but . . . it's out of tune."

I shouldn't act like I care. I don't need any friends here; I'll be gone at the first sign of gaps in the security. But something in his musical phrasing reminded me of the old Kondrashin piano recordings Papa and Zhenya and I listened to, Zhenya dutifully transcribing the notes in his private notation. "Have you been playing for long?"

His dark eyes meet mine again. I know that tightness around them well—the look I gave to anyone who noticed me, the slip of a girl darting along Moscow's streets. I don't blame him for not trusting me; I'll use whatever and whoever I can to escape.

"All my life." He eases his posture; I uncoil in turn. "My mother taught me so I could accompany her when she played violin."

"She must be very proud of you," I tell him. But it was the wrong thing to say. He drops his head and the tension returns.

"Valentin here wants to be the next . . . What's his name,

Valya?” Sergei nudges him in the ribs—none too gently, I suspect. “Dave Barback?”

“Brubeck,” Valentin says to the piano keys.

“Yes! Great American jazz composer, Valya tells me. But no one in the Soviet Union cares about jazz. Colored people music,” Sergei says. I bristle, though I’m not surprised. Most Russians think like Sergei—Africans, Asians, even olive-skinned people like myself from Georgia and the other southern republics are treated suspiciously.

Valentin eyes me with a slight tilt to his head. “My family is Georgian, too.”

“Did I give you permission to read my mind?” I snap. He winces and tucks his hands into his lap.

“Come on, let me show you the view out back,” Sergei says. “Valya won’t follow us out there. He hates the river.”

Sergei pulls me onto the rear balcony of cracked concrete. A long shadow in my periphery marks Boris, moving closer, but Sergei closes the door before he reaches us. My blood races when I realize that this side of the mansion is not hemmed in by the cold concrete wall. But my hope instantly deflates. It’s a sheer drop—the mansion perches on a cliff overlooking the Moskva River. We’re somewhere in the hills of southeastern Moscow. Barges chug through the oily gray water beneath us; the Metro trains clatter across the river bridge. To the north, at the heart of the city, I can make out the peaks of the Seven Sisters—Stalin’s skyscrapers capped in gold and red stars—and the pink turrets of the Novodevichy Monastery jutting defiantly above the river.

“There’s Luzhniki Stadium.” Sergei stands behind me and

points around me to the low white pod just opposite the river from us. It looks like an alien craft that could take flight at any moment—sail into the stars like the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin or the *Sputnik* satellite. “I’m going to play for Spartak there someday. I’ll be the greatest hockey player in the world.”

I don’t mean to, but I can feel the sadness sheening his bare arms. They’ve taken something from all of us. For me, it was Mama and Zhenya, and my dreams of studying at Moscow State so I could fix Zhenya someday. What else have they taken from Sergei, besides his hockey career? But when I glance back at him, his face is blank, a frieze of the Worker as He Advances the Motherland, unmoving.

“You want to go to Moscow State?” He swings me around to my left by my shoulders. “Look.”

I stumble back into his dense chest. I can only see the top of the tower over the mansion’s roof, but I know it instantly. It’s the greatest of Stalin’s Seven Sisters; the bright red star and the golden sickle and hammer upon it are perfectly clear. The education I crave is just out of reach.

I scrub at my eyes—they’re moist from the wind, I tell myself—and look away.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he says. “I just thought you’d like . . .”

“It doesn’t matter.” When I find Mama and Zhenya and run away from this place, I’ll have to leave it behind. I’ll keep teaching myself, as I’ve been doing. We’ll keep running; we’ll watch Moscow shrink to a speck over our shoulders. Always running, forever—

Sergei's hand touches my shoulder. It burns with conflicting emotions: Sadness? Anger? "Yulia, you have to stop thinking about escape. It's too dangerous."

"What do you care?" A barge sounds its horn; I peer over the balcony ledge. If it were straight down, I could survive it, but the embankment slopes just enough . . .

"Maybe I don't. You wouldn't be the first to try." He shrugs. "But believe me, if there's one thing I've learned here . . . There are worse things than a bullet in the back, a broken neck. What they can do to your brain, or your family's . . ."

Sergei flinches; his gaze roves anxiously, unsettled. I step away from him, not liking the sudden darkness I sense on his skin.

"Death would be a mercy," he says. "For you and your family both."