

CHAPTER 1

It was no ordinary brick. The wall from which it had just been chipped was no ordinary wall. At the time, it was hard to put that brick in context and to fully appreciate the significance of removing it from that wall, and standing atop the wall waving the brick in the air, for all to see.

Still, everyone knew it was no ordinary brick. The man holding it knew, the wall certainly knew, all the bright lights and cameras pointed at the man knew. And millions of people around the world knew.

The Wall in Berlin was beginning to crumble. A brick at a time, and this was the first. The rest would come down quickly in a cascade that was unimaginable even a few weeks earlier. But on this eventful night, no one fully grasped what it meant.

In a long-running test of wills, East and West Germany had been separated by closed borders since 1952 with the only open passage being between the left and right sides of Berlin. By August 1961, the East German government had erected a wall to close off even that avenue. It went up overnight, on a weekend when fewer people would notice, and Berliners awoke on a Sunday morning to find there was no longer any way of crossing to the other side of the city. The barrier soon became a solid wall; over the next few months, it became two solid walls, frequently strengthened over the years to improve impenetrability. Many people died in attempts to scale the wall, and a few succeeded, but it mostly managed to keep them apart.

The act of defiance by the man standing on the wall with that single brick had been prompted by Hungary. Two months earlier, they had opened their shared border to allow East Germans to seek refuge. Everyone kept expecting a response, probably a brutal one, from the Soviet régime in Moscow. When it didn't come, the people of East Berlin were emboldened.

As welcome as the Hungarian action had been, this wall was symbolic and its opening was a signal that the long Cold War between East and West might finally be coming to a close.

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Watching the events on Soviet television, Vladimir and Maria Makarov kept a stunned silence. They had lived all their lives under the Soviet Union's version of communism and they had adapted well to the sometimes harsh realities of the system. But this was something completely beyond their experience: not the actual events unfolding in Berlin, but the fact it was being shown on their television.

They were simple people. Vladimir was a groundskeeper at the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoye Selo. He had started working there as a young man just after the end of the Second World War when the town was known as Pushkin, after the great Russian poet.

It seemed almost overnight that everything Vladimir had known all his life disappeared, including the Soviet Union. He had always considered himself to be Russian first and Soviet second, but now he was just a Russian. Vladimir died, just a few weeks after the official collapse of the USSR, on the very day that Pushkin reverted to its historic name of Tsarskoye Selo, the Tsar's' Village.

His widow, Maria Makarova, was left with one daughter, Katya. Maria was a ticket taker at the Catherine Palace and life continued for her much the same as it always had. Except now she made the trip alone every day. Her daughter was still in school but old enough to be trusted alone, so Maria just carried on.

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A decade later, all the goodwill that was generated between east and west by the destruction of the Wall had long ago dissipated, had been squandered and wasted. The Soviet Union itself had ceased to exist within two years of that chilly November evening, the night when the world realized, just for a moment, how important one single brick could be.

And as life in the former Soviet Union degenerated into a struggle to overcome years of poor management, a steady flow of carpetbaggers from the West arrived to pick over the bones of the former enemy and to steal what they could. Lawlessness arose on a scale so great that the Russians could not cope and the opportunistic leaped at their chances to avail themselves of all the worst of capitalistic excesses. The dispossessed were left to fend for themselves and people learned to make do with what they had and what they could trade. And they learned the behaviours of survival.

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"It's disgusting."

Katya stopped, suddenly realizing the voice was speaking to her. "What?", she said.

"It's disgusting. Yesterday it was revolting and today it is only disgusting."

The voice belonged to Sergei Kropotkin who worked in his parents' kiosk on Nevsky Prospekt selling snacks and Russian cigarettes to anyone unwise enough to eat them or smoke them.

"I guess from the way you are dressed that you won't be wanting any of this slop today. Where are you off to?"

Katya had known Sergei all her life. Their parents had lived next to each other, they had been born on the same day, had gone to school together, and even though they had drifted apart since their teenage years, they probably knew each other better than two people usually can.

Katya had been rushing along the street with her head down and had not noticed Sergei as she sped passed. Almost every day she saw him, and every time he would announce the quality of his mother's pelmeni. He sold a lot of them but he

had always told Katya he liked her too much to allow her to eat them. Even when they were only disgusting.

"Oh, I'm just going to meet a friend for a late lunch. I'm in a bit of a hurry, Sergei. I'll probably see you tomorrow."

With that, Katya hurried away. Sergei watched her go, thinking it was a shame that she had lost her way and at the same time saying to the man standing in front of him: "They're delicious. You won't find better pelmeni in all of St. Petersburg."

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A couple of hours earlier, Katya was getting ready for her lunch date. On her way to the restaurant, she was going to do something she had never done before; she was going to vote for the first time in her life. Her parents had always quietly snickered at the process while putting on their best patriotic faces and, in the case of her father, a whole lot of medals. They would troop off to the voting booth, ready to cast their ballots for the only choice they were allowed to have.

Voting in the Soviet Union had been a bit of a farce; your only choice was which party bureaucrat you wanted manipulating your life and generally screwing up your existence for the next five years; same party, same ideas, even the faces of the old grey men looked the same. And everybody was pretty sure that the face was predetermined before the election, that voting didn't really count for anything. Now that the wall had fallen in Berlin, now that Communist rule had finally departed Russia, Katya knew that a different kind of farce was underway.

But voting, free elections; now there was something to get the blood pumping. Katya was sure about what she was going to do, though. She was going to march proudly into the voting booth, the first time she was old enough to have a formal say in her life, and ruin her ballot. There wasn't much other way to tell them that she thought the whole thing was a sham. Like all young Russians, Katya had known nothing but Party rule all her life. And like many of her contemporaries, she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The western media had been so excited about the fall of Communism, how Democracy – always with a capital letter – was going to transform the world of the newly freed Russians and bring them great wealth and freedom. For Katya, though, nothing much had changed except the things that never worked very well before worked even worse now.

She had already decided what vulgar expression to write across the ballot and even though she knew that nice girls didn't talk that way, she wasn't sure she could call herself a nice girl. In fact, she knew she couldn't.

She was Yuri's mistress, the twenty-year-old tart of a married man. An old married man. A rich old married man, which at least made it seem practical even if it didn't seem decent. But worse, she was David's mistress too. Even though David was also married, at least his wife was back in the United States where there was no fear of ever meeting her. Katya lived only a few blocks from Yuri's daughter and

there was always the fear, and maybe a little bit of thrill, that they might be seen together.

It wasn't easy trying to keep her life organized, to keep Yuri and David from knowing about each other, to keep everyone else from knowing about either of them. But if there is one thing she had managed to learn at the Polytechnic Institute, it was time management. While her original goal had been business studies, being a kept whore was a much easier way to make a good living.

So on this uncommonly warm St. Petersburg afternoon, Katya got herself ready to go and do her civic duty. She lived in what she considered to be a luxury apartment; that is, she had her own bathroom. And since that was a pleasure she still hadn't managed to get used to, she lingered in the shower feeling the warm water play across her skin. Her mind raced ahead because this was David's day to see her and he was always more extravagant than Yuri. He had promised her a special lunch today at a restaurant that would never have fit into her life's plan before embarking on her career as a self-employed rich man's toy. They needed to meet early because David had to get ready later for his before-the-crack-of-dawn-when-decent-people-are-still-asleep flight to Baku.

Katya pushed her face into the weak stream of the shower, careful to keep one eye on the clock since she knew she only had about eleven minutes before the water started turning cold, and tried to wash away the sins of last night. In the background, she could hear the radio murmuring and the incessant hum of the construction machinery on the street outside her flat.

In Soviet days, the reconstruction of the sidewalks would probably have been a project designed for no purpose other than to give jobs to a few people and for some bureaucrat to look like he was doing something useful. These days, most of the work being done was to undo the shoddy work done by the unqualified friends and relatives of party officials in Soviet times who just happened to need work. After all, Katya lived in the Pribaltiskaya area on Vasilevsky Island which had all been built or rebuilt within the past thirty years or so and shouldn't be as run down as it had become.

Katya finished her shower, just as the water started to run chilly, and stepping out of the stall she towed herself dry. She stood looking at herself in the floor-length mirror. She was thinking that if you looked just at her chest, you wouldn't quite think she was a boy but you'd be pretty sure she was just entering puberty. Still, it gave her the freedom of not having to worry about whether she wore a bra, and usually she didn't. Even her short hair was a little boyish but with her long slender legs and swaying hips, no one watching her walk down the street would be confused.

Walking into the bed-sitting room where she had already laid out her clothes for the day, she looked at the crumpled up jeans she had dumped on the floor last night. David had bought those for her. Like most westerners, he was under the delusion that the way to a Russian girl's heart was to give her expensive blue jeans. And like most Russians, she would rather have had corduroy, which cost a small fortune. She wasn't sure whether David couldn't figure out the right size or if he

just liked seeing in her pants so tight she could barely breathe. But she made sure to wear them at least occasionally when she was seeing him.

She put on the pretty blue dress she had laid out, also a gift from David and also a little tighter than it should be, and began the tedious job of applying her make-up. Unless she was seeing David or Yuri, she never wore make-up. She thought it was just a waste of time and didn't do anything to improve the look of her face which was, she knew, stunning. But she was their painted lady and a painted lady needs to be, well, painted.

By the time she was ready, it was getting late. They were to meet at Sadko, one of the best traditional Russian restaurants in St. Petersburg and she would need to hurry. Sadko's clientele had changed over the years; before, you had to be a Party official or a passenger on one of the endless parade of Intourist buses which clogged the street in front of the restaurant every night. Now, you just had to be rich or a member of the Russian mafia.

It was just a short ride on the Metro to get to where she was supposed to vote, in a government building about two blocks from Sergei's kiosk. She had just been hurrying to get the voting over with when she ran into Sergei. She liked him, and wished she had time to talk, but she was sure there would be another day and they could have a chat like they hadn't in several years. Lately, she found she had been missing his friendship.

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As Sergei watched Katya leave, he wondered about the man who was behind her. He had stopped walking when Katya had halted to speak with Sergei and milled around looking at shops and gazing at the sky as though he was confused about what he was doing there. But as soon as Katya left, the man immediately resumed his course about ten metres behind her.

Probably just a coincidence, thought Sergei. Katya was a pretty girl who might easily attract perverts but that sort of thing didn't normally happen in broad daylight.

He turned back to his customer who had made the mistake of agreeing to buy the pelmeni.

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Katya continued down the street and crossed over one of the many bridges that traversed the Neva.

St. Petersburg is a big city, in the sense of spread over a large area. It was raised on the banks where the Neva River debouches into the Gulf of Finland and much of it was formed out of reclaimed lowland and swamp. Like New Orleans and Venice, the city is essentially at sea level and it has been built around a myriad of canals, the Neva and fifty smaller rivers, and forty-four islands linked by about four hundred bridges.

The city started life as St. Petersburg. It is uncertain if that name is a biblical reference or a nod to the city's founder, Tsar Peter the Great. If the latter, it is a city worthy of the man; Peter was 'great' in most senses of the word, including being seven feet tall. It was later known as Petrograd and after the death of the leader of Russia's revolution, it became Leningrad. After the fall of communism, the citizens of the city voted to return to the historical name.

Until the rise of communism in Russia, St. Petersburg was the country's capital. Lenin relocate the capital to Moscow in a nod to Russia's historic ancient capital and as a way of trying to distance the new government from the seat of royal authority.

Today, St. Petersburg is a huge architectural and art museum. There are so many architectural masterpieces as to defy the imagination — statuary, graceful palaces, triumphal arches, bridges, parks, churches.

Katya never failed to notice the beauty of the city, even when she was in a hurry. And she had been thinking earlier today about the beauty of the sunrise over Catherine Palace as she made her way home in the very early hours this morning.

When she finally arrived at the voting place, another beautiful old building preserved from the eighteenth century, she entered the doorway without noticing that her silent companion slipped in right behind her.

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