

SURVIVING SIBERIA



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Chapter 1

THE LAST TIME

What they would later call “The Day of Lasts” began much like any other day for the Sokolov family, offering no hint at what would come. Fourteen-year-old Katya never imagined that it would be the last time she’d wake up in her tiny bedroom, which had once been a storage closet. The sun rose earlier now that spring was in bloom, and the bright beams of light slipping through the large cracks around her door roused her from a delicious dream.

She rolled over and kicked off her covers, then heard a *thud*. Peering over the edge of her bed, she snatched up her journal with its brown leather cover and tucked it under her pillow. She must have fallen asleep with it in her hands after finishing her daily writing last night. It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened. Getting out of bed and stretching, she gazed longingly at her mother’s handmade patchwork quilt that beckoned her back to its warm confines.

That morning, Katya took for granted her familiar trip down the short, shabby hall to the kitchen, her stomach growling along the way. She always woke up ravenously hungry these days. “You’re growing so fast your own shadow can’t keep up!” her father had joked, tousling the wavy light brown hair that cascaded down her back almost to her waist. Such a suggestion was thrilling, for she endured frequent teasing about being the shortest girl in her class.

With mounting anticipation, her eyes eagerly scoured the round cloth-covered table in the cramped and cluttered kitchen that usually offered some sort of appealing tidbit, no matter the time of day. That morning the table held a basket of small sour cherries that had been brought from a southern market. There was also a dish of cream-colored pine nuts; Katya grabbed a small handful and began to munch. She could hear her mother, Olga, humming through the open kitchen window above the sink.

It was a rarity in the crowded city of Moscow to have a glass-enclosed balcony that could be enjoyed year-round, and the Sokolov family counted themselves blessed. Every inch of the outdoor space had been optimized for growth, and pots of all sizes would soon be overflowing with Olga’s garden of carefully and lovingly grown herbs and medicinal flowers. Last year’s dwindling harvest was stored in jars and crocks that lined the kitchen shelves, and Olga had meticulously

collected and saved the mature seeds to plant again this year.

Katya was always full of questions, so when Olga flung open the balcony door with a sudden bang, Katya immediately blurted, “What are you doing out there?”

Her mother held up hands covered in rich black soil, a sprig of fresh dill pinched between two fingers. “What do you think?”

Katya ducked her head sheepishly; of course her mother was gardening.

Aleksei, Katya’s sixteen-year-old brother, appeared in the kitchen doorway, already dressed in a gray wool shirt and brown trousers, and Olga smiled softly at her children as she went to clean her hands.

“*Dobroye utro*, good morning,” she said, drying her hands on a towel and moving to the counter, where a bowl of cracked eggs and a whisk sat waiting for her return. Aleksei tossed a cherry into his mouth and mumbled a greeting while he chewed around the pit. As Olga stripped the thin dill leaves from their stem, Katya couldn’t help but notice the tired, worn look on her mother’s face. Over the past week, a fine crease had developed between her eyes, making her suddenly appear older than her thirty-six years.

“Here, Mother, let me do that,” Katya offered, taking up a cutting board and quickly mincing the fresh herbs, setting some aside for their dinner. Olga added the chopped dill to the mixing bowl, followed by some

salt and other seasonings, then poured the concoction onto a warmed pan with a sizzle.

“Aleksei,” Olga began as she scraped the bottom of the pan carefully, lumps beginning to form in the liquid eggs, “your father already left, but he asked for you to come straight home after your duties are finished for the day. He has something to talk to you about.” The children’s father, Boris, was a professor of literature at Moscow State University. He was also a skilled carpenter, and he and Aleksei often made furniture and decorative wood pieces as a covert way of supplementing the family’s income. Olga had worked as a nurse before her first baby was born, but now she took in sewing and mending jobs, which allowed her to be at home with her children.

As Aleksei nodded his agreement, he replied, “I will, Mother. I’ll also go wake Sergei for breakfast now.”

Just then, blue eyes topped with tousled blond hair peeped around the doorway. “It smells good!” their ten-year-old little brother called out enthusiastically.

That last breakfast at home was so steeped in the ordinary that no one paid it any attention at the time. Once they had gobbled up their savory eggs, Aleksei left for the physical conditioning class he was required to attend before school, and the younger children put on their uniforms, combed their hair, packed their books into their school satchels, and said goodbye to their mother.

It was a warm morning, the kind the Russian people savored after long winter months, and with an unspoken agreement, Katya and Sergei veered off the main road to take the slightly longer route, unaware that it would be their last walk to school. Sergei chattered in his usual cheerful way about the beautiful day and how he was going to beat Andrei at marbles in the schoolyard. The path took them through Gorky Park, where just a few days previously they had gathered with their classmates for International Workers' Day, a celebration of the Soviet way and the achievements of socialism. Katya's voice was still a little raw from loudly singing the patriotic Russian songs and cheering for the tanks and soldiers who marched in the parade down the cracked asphalt roads. Red banners and pictures of Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin had been hung throughout the city and still flapped in the gentle morning breeze. Though her family always participated in the festivities, as required, and Katya attended Young Pioneers meetings, which were also highly encouraged, she knew her parents did not agree with many of the political ideas forced on the Russian people over the last few decades. Each member of the family, however, understood that saying such things in public would mean immediate and severe consequences, so they kept their beliefs quiet.

That day of school proceeded like any other: Katya had classes in mathematics, Russian language and

literature, physics, and the history of the USSR, with mounds of homework assigned for the evening. During the transitions between classes, Katya's friends planned and dreamed about all the things they would do together during the upcoming summer break. Katya nodded along, but secretly, she wanted nothing more than to curl up with a good book—or three—and spend entire days lost in the depths of a story. Her father had recently brought home a new book, *Timur and His Squad*, and she was eager to start it. She also wanted to revisit some familiar, beloved tales like Zoshchenko's short stories, including *The Galoshes and Ice Cream*. She made a mental note to begin a list of things to read this summer so she wouldn't forget any.

After school ended, Katya and Sergei went to a youth choir rehearsal, and they arrived home just before six o'clock that evening, with Sergei scampering ahead up the final flight of stairs, shouting, "I'll race you home!" and beating Katya down the hall and through their apartment door.

Katya's school satchel slid off her shoulder and thumped to the floor as she kicked the door shut behind her, huffing. The smell of sewing machine oil pervaded the small living room, and she idly wondered what project her mother had been working on. *Could it be my new coat?* Katya perked up at the thought, then mentally corrected herself. *It's not a new coat, but it's new to me. I hope I can wear it at least a few*

times this spring. An elderly neighbor down the hall had become bedridden over the winter, and Olga had tended to her, bringing herbs, broth, and friendly conversation. When the woman passed away, her husband gave Olga her warm winter coat as a gesture of appreciation for their friendship. It was a struggle to come by good fabric, but the high-quality coat had been made in Europe and looked very expensive. Olga had quickly decided to alter it to fit Katya next winter, since her old coat was now several inches too short in the wrists, and it was difficult to take a deep breath with it buttoned up.

Halfway across the compact sitting room that could only fit two chairs, Katya suddenly stopped short. She realized that the smell she had most expected was missing. At this time of day, her mother was always cooking, but none of the usual banging and shuffling noises came from the kitchen this evening, and there were no wafting aromas of their usual hearty beet-red soup called *borscht*.

“Mother?” Katya called out, wondering if she was ill. She couldn’t remember the last time dinner had not been ready when she got home from choir. Her imagination took off, and panic filled her chest as she pictured her mother lying in her bed, pressing a handkerchief to her scalding forehead with a trembling hand as she weakly called for Katya to bring her a small sip of water.

Just then, her mother, whole and well, came out of the back bedroom and motioned urgently to her daughter. "There you are. Come here, quickly."

Katya sighed in relief, the worry draining from her body as her imagined scenario dissipated; then she ambled down the hall. She casually glanced into her parents' room as she passed by the open door, and her jaw dropped in shock when she saw boxes and suitcases propped open on the bed, piled with mounds of clothing.

"What is going o—" The words caught in Katya's throat as she followed her mother into her brothers' room. Olga muttered to herself as she began to pull books off the shelves and throw them into the bin they used to collect items for the burn pile.

"That Aleksei," she complained. "He is so much like his father. If a book is banned, you can be sure he will find a way to get his hands on a copy and read it." She examined the spine of the book she was holding, then shook her head and threw it into the bin along with the others.

Sergei was kneeling on the floor, stretching to reach something under his bed. His face changed from strained to satisfied as he announced, "I got it!" and pulled out the tattered suitcase Olga had used when she left home to attend nursing school.

"Now listen closely, both of you," Olga said urgently. "You must each pack your bags with only the most

essential belongings. Three shirts. Two sweaters. Two pairs of pants or skirts. Socks. Shoes. Underwear.” She paused to think. “Coats. Warm underclothes. Mittens and a hat.”

Katya wrinkled her nose. “Mother, it’s warming up outside! Where are we going that we will need mittens and hats?”

“Just do what I ask. Hair comb. Bar of soap.” Olga kept rattling off items as Katya, alarmed, headed to her room and pulled out the soft canvas bag covered in yellow painted stars she had used when they visited her grandparents, who lived in the countryside several hours away. She carefully wrapped her two best ribbons around her fingers in a smooth loop, their silky sky-blue color brightening the bottom recesses of her bag. Reaching toward the shelves at the foot of her bed that held her clothing, Katya tried to remember the items her mother had listed, but the stress of the situation made her mind go blank, and her fear grew. Why were they packing in such a great rush? Where were they going?

She searched her room, adding assorted items to her bag that she thought might be helpful on a trip: a hairbrush, a pad of paper, her nearly empty bottle of perfume, and a handful of wrapped caramel candies. As a last thought, she slipped her journal into a discreet side pocket.

Feeling like she couldn’t take the suspense any longer, Katya threw down her half-filled bag and went

out into the hallway once more. She found Olga in the kitchen, moving quickly but with glazed-over eyes as she attempted to fit a set of china teacups, a framed sepia-toned picture of her parents, and an old baby doll that Katya had stopped playing with years ago into a small leather satchel.

“Why are you packing *those* things? Mother, where are we going?” Katya asked earnestly.

Olga jumped, startled, then looked into her daughter’s eyes before glancing at the satchel in front of her. “Oh! My goodness, you’re right. I wasn’t thinking straight.” She took out the random objects and began filling the bag instead with items from the kitchen shelf—herbs, dried apples, cheese, fruit preserves, and a loaf of bread.

Then the door to the apartment flew open.

Olga’s eyes bulged in panic, and her hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a scream.

SURVIVING SIBERIA

At the end of a school day like any other, fourteen-year-old Katya comes home to find her mother frantically packing to leave Moscow that night. As the family prepares to flee, they are intercepted by officers, and soon Katya, her mother, and her two brothers are separated from her father and crammed into a train headed into the unknown. In an unfamiliar world defined by cold and hunger, Katya must learn not only how to survive but how to keep hope and courage alive.

