Winter, 1919, Siberia in the chaos of the Russian Civil War. Jake Greenberg, investigating the murder of three Americans, escapes on the last train from Omsk on the Transsiberian RR, fighting blizzards, and partisans, while hunting the murderer on board.

The Last Train

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# One

## *Omsk, Siberia, October 22, 1919*

Charlie Ramsey squinted against the darkness, straining to catch any movement around boxcar seven. Nothing. He glanced up at the sky. The quarter moon, hidden by stringy clouds, would be no help. Without looking at his watch he knew it was time.

"Cover me," he whispered to the short man beside him named McCartle. Ramsey felt more than saw his companion nod. A third man, a giant named Montgomery, crouching behind them, grunted.

Ramsey stood still, listening. All he heard was the wind whistling between the boxcars and locomotives, and far off people sounds. The rail yard was a small city these days, full of refugees and soldiers living in boxcars. Like in a city, this was one of the bad parts of town, full of broken-down cars, deserted at night.

Was there anything he had overlooked? No. Ramsey thought he'd done everything he could. He had gone so far as posting a letter to his children back in Seattle, just in case things went badly.

The man that he had been seeking for weeks had insisted on meeting here. Despite the cold, he felt clammy with sweat. He didn't like it. There were better, safer places to meet. But the go-between had insisted on meeting here. Even with his backups, which he was not supposed to bring, this meeting felt wrong. He touched his pocket and felt the reassuring weight of his revolver.

"Montgomery, keep watch behind us. McCartle," he said to the short man, "as soon as I go into the car, move up."

"Okay, Boss. Don't you worry none."

Ramsey smiled in the dark and patted McCartle's shoulder. "Not with you here, buddy," he said with a lot more confidence than he felt.

Ramsey edged down the line of boxcars, listening at each one, then moving on, stepping as lightly as he could on the hard packed snow. At the seventh car, he paused, squatted down and studied the car. No light seeped from between the boards. He looked behind him. McCartle and Montgomery were invisible in the shadows. He scanned under the car. Nothing. Now he was really sweating. Had the man changed his mind? He half hoped so. The next meeting, he said firmly to himself, would be in a safer place.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, making a cloud in the icy air. It didn't calm his nerves. After a moment, he stood and moved to the boxcar's door. He pushed on it and was surprised to find that it slid back easily. Someone had recently oiled it. He could see nothing inside. The boxcar's interior was inky black.

"Santos," he said quietly using the password he had been given by the go-between.

"Christos," came the husky reply from within.

Okay, Ramsey said to himself, let's get this thing going. Using the steel ladder beside the door, he climbed up and stepped through the doorway. He couldn't see a thing, but he kept his right hand near his gun.

"Hel—" Ramsey started to say. Then he saw the glint of metal. Before he could move, the car lit up with muzzle flashes. Two massive fists plowed into his chest. He fought to keep his balance. He couldn't. Falling back out of the car onto the snow, Ramsey gasped for breath. A curtain was coming down over his eyes. He fought against it, but he was too weak and there was nothing he could do. More gun shots. Far away, it seemed. Suddenly waves of excruciating pain exploded in his head and everything went black.

# Two

## *Vladivostok, Siberia, November 1, 1919*

Jake Greenberg glanced at his watch. Noon. It was time for him to meet with the general. He closed his roll-top desk and picked up his hat and coat. This was not going to be good, he thought. The only reason the top man would send for him was to deliver bad news.

Jake nodded to the big Russian soldier guarding the entrance of Amerika Haus and walked out into Railroad Square. On the other side of the huge plaza, he could see a long passenger train gliding into the massive stone and concrete terminus of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. No battle damage on the train as far as he could see. They were getting shot up all the time now. Out of habit, Jake wondered where it was from. It was impossible to know these days. Schedules were a thing of the past. Trains now worked station to station along the Trans-Siberian and hoped for the best.

He pulled up the collar of his coat, tugged his hat a bit lower on his forehead, and then turned right, down Svetlanskaya toward army headquarters. A misty wind blowing off the bay was coming directly at him, sending flags straight and twirling bits of debris into the air. Snow would be better, he thought, than this almost rain. Everyone he knew hated being here, and rightly so. It was a cold, damp, dreary place now and winter would be worse. But it probably bothered him less than the other foreigners stuck in Vladivostok. There was nothing left for him back home.

In front of Kunst and Albers, the leading department store, Jake stepped into the street to get around the crowd. The war

between the Bolsheviks and the anti-communists had made some people very wealthy. But among the well-dressed shoppers were beggars—refugees fleeing the Reds and wounded soldiers wearing bits of their old uniforms. No soldier was whole. Each had a limb or two missing, an eye gone, a part of a face horribly shot away. Jake dropped a silver coin into the hat of one man with no legs sitting in a child's cart.

Within a block or two, he had heard Russian, Chinese, French, English, and a few languages he couldn't identify. The city was swollen with refugees as well as soldiers from a dozen countries. It was almost a year since the war ended in Europe, but the armies of the great powers were still in Siberia. England, France, America, and Japan each had said grand and humanitarian things. Each made sure the others didn't gain some advantage in the chaos of Russian politics.

He stopped at a corner to let a cavalry patrol of the Joint Forces trot by. This one he noted was led by a young American lieutenant who rode hunched against the wind and mist, his face a mask of stoic unhappiness. Trailing him was a pair of grim Japanese, two Englishmen, a Czech, and a couple of Chinese.

He crossed the small street and continued down Svetlanskaya. This was Vladivostok's main street, lined with the city's best—fashionable stores, the Naval Club and its rival, the Military Club, and the three leading hotels. Most of them were housed in grim, gray concrete buildings. At the Golden Horn Hotel, he checked the bullet marks, gouged in its stone front during last year's failed Bolshevik coup. It was his political meter. If the hotel repaired them, it was a sign that people expected the anti-communist government to win. They were still untouched. He turned to cross the street, letting a trolley and several trucks go by.

As he stepped into the street, a passing van slowed almost to a stop, then picked up speed, spewing out black smoke and shuddering forward. Suddenly, it backfired with a sharp ear-splitting crack. Jake jumped, his knees almost buckling. His breath came in short bursts and he thought his heart would explode. He reached out, his hand shaking, to steady himself against a lamppost. For several minutes, he stood there, sweating and feeling a little sick.

An English soldier came up. "You all right, chappie?"

"Yes, fine thanks," Jake managed to say, not feeling fine at all. A second trolley went by, then another. Finally his breathing slowed and the sick feeling began to fade. He stood away from the lamppost and straightened his tie. His legs felt less rubbery. He took a slow, deep breath. Not as bad as some, he said to himself. Maybe that's progress. He looked at his watch and took another deep breath. He had to hurry now or he would be late.

Major General William Graves, U.S. Army, took off his glasses as he paced his large, but sparsely furnished office. He was a lean, scholarly-looking man, slightly gray around the temples with a firm cleft chin and serious black eyes. Pausing at his window, Graves rubbed the bridge of his nose as he squinted up at the low billows of dark clouds. Then he closed his bad eye and tried to read the signs on the buildings in Commerce Square. No good, he thought, as he slipped on his glasses again. His eyes were getting worse. With glasses he could still read the store signs on Svetlanskaya, just beyond the square, but not as well as last month. If his eyes kept on going downhill, he knew the War Department would put him out to pasture. With the Great War over they had far too many generals.

"Here he comes," Graves said, watching Jake cross the trolley tracks in front of the Golden Horn Hotel. He turned away from the window and looked pensively at the other man in the room, Warren Sewell, a major in the Intelligence Service. "You think he's the man for the job?"

"I do, general. I—"

"A civilian? It seems to me that an army officer would be best." The War Department had hired civilians to run the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Graves was old army and he didn't like civilians mixing in army business. But that wasn't what bothered him. He had heard the backfire and seen Greenberg's reaction. However, he wouldn't tell Sewell that.

"I laid out my arguments in my memo, sir," Sewell said slowly. "Greenberg was in France with the Canadians, infantry. Forty-eighth Highlanders, the Toronto regiment, I believe. He did some work with the British intelligence service while recovering from a wound."

"I thought all the railroaders were Americans."

"Greenberg was living in Pittsburgh when Ramsey hired him," Seawall continued. "I don't know more than that. But he understands our problems with the railroad. I think he's the best man for the job."

"How old is he?"

"Mid-twenties, I believe, general."

"He looks older."

"Greenberg had some hard service during the war."

"Works well?" Graves asked.

"Very good man, sir. Some say he does too much."

Graves grunted and nodded. He had seen other veterans throw themselves obsessively into work to fill their lives and leave no room to think about anything else. "What about his private life?"

"He doesn't drink much, if that is what you mean, general. Just a beer or two at the Military Club from what I've seen. I don't know much else about him. Keeps to himself. Since he was hired by the railroad people, we don't have detailed background information on him." Sewell paused for a moment, then added, "He's not like some of them. We've had no trouble with him."

"He seems to be intelligent," Graves admitted. "Talked to him once or twice." Army headquarters in Vladivostok was small enough that he knew all of his officers and had, at least, shaken hands with most of the civilian railroaders. "I *have* read your memo," Graves said irritably. "I think you just don't want to risk one of your officers."

"Sir, you know I think the situation with the anti-communist government in Omsk is hopeless. I don't care what the Russians or the State Department or anyone else says. Greenberg has experience that none of my officers have, and he has a special incentive to do the job." Sewell cleared his throat.

Graves knew he was about to make a pronouncement. Sewell was an excellent staff officer. Unfortunately he was also a pedantic bore.

"Someone has to investigate, sir," Sewell continued. "We can't ignore this. We need to find out what is going on. We could have every American in Siberia at risk."

"I think every foreigner west of here is at risk right now." Graves paused. "If we use a civilian, Greenberg is..."

A knock on the door interrupted him. "Yes?"

A young-looking sergeant stepped in the room. "Sir, Mr. Greenberg is here."

"Send him in," Graves said as he took off his glasses and laid them on his desk, closing his eyes for a moment. He had been sent to Siberia with the haziest of orders—help keep the railroad open, don't take sides in the civil war, and protect the rusting piles of war supplies that had been sent to Vladivostok during the war. It was clear to him a day after he stepped off the transport *Thomas* that it would be impossible to stay neutral in the civil war. The very act of keeping the railroad operating helped the anti-Bolsheviks, the so-called Whites. He wished Washington would just tell him what they wanted. There was no hope of that. They wanted to say America was neutral and still help the Whites. He was their scapegoat if anything went wrong. He envied his fellow British, French, and Japanese commanders. They had clear orders—support the Whites. Graves sighed and put his glasses back on. He was ready to do his duty.

Graves smiled and came around his desk to shake hands with him. That was not a good sign. During the war, when a general paid a friendly visit to the troops, he was about to send you over the top and get a lot of people killed.

Jake thought he knew what Graves was going to say. It was hard, if not impossible, to keep secrets here. Vladivostok was a rumor factory. The latest was that his friend Charlie Ramsey had been hurt somewhere around Omsk.

"Have a seat." Graves pointed to a chair next to Major Sewell and sat behind his desk.

"Thank you, general. Good morning, major," Jake said to the chubby Sewell and settled in for the bad news. Charlie had been his boss in Railroad Security and a war buddy. They were like brothers, wounded on the same day, sent to the same hospital in England to recover. More than that, he owed Charlie for getting a pretty pathetic Jake Greenberg back on his feet. Charlie had hired him straight out of a drunk tank in Pittsburgh.

"Have you heard about Ramsey?" Graves asked.

"Rumor has it he was hurt in Omsk," Jake said. "That he's in the hospital there."

"I received another telegram early last night from Lieutenant Moden, Liaison Office, Omsk. It's far worse than that. McCartle and Montgomery were shot dead, and Ramsey is in critical condition."

Jake felt as if Graves had slammed him in the stomach. "I didn't know," was all he could manage to say.

"I know you're close to Ramsey, so I wanted you to tell you personally."

"Thank you. Is there something I can do?" Jake asked, feeling stupid the instant he said it. Omsk was nearly 3,000 miles away, ten days by train if all went well, and it rarely did these days.

"As a matter of fact," Sewell said, "there is something you can do. We have to send someone there to investigate what happened to them and to get Ramsey out. There have been other Americans attacked and we need to know what happened and why."

"And you want me to go?"

"I'm thinking about it," Graves said. "You worked with him in railroad security."

"Yes, sir."

"I know you have some experience in intelligence."

"I can start today," Jake said, his spirits rising.

"I'll get to that in a minute," Graves said. "You were in France, a sergeant?"

"Two years on the line, almost to the day. Out with a leg wound. Shrapnel."

"Did you ever kill anyone? Close up, I mean."

"Yes." Jake was not going to elaborate unless Graves pushed him. "We were a front line unit. We fought through some villages and had some hand-to-hand in the trenches." He said the words in a matter-of-fact tone, knowing that neither Graves nor Sewell could really understand what it was like to be on the line in France. Like most of the officers in Siberia, they had been stationed in the Philippines or in California and had not seen action in the war.

"Could you kill someone again?"

"If I had to."

Graves stood up and walked to the window behind his desk. The mist had turned to sleet, sounding like pebbles striking the window. He stood there for a moment, letting the sound fill the room. Then he turned and said, "Some men came back from the war badly scarred, Jake, physically as well as mentally. I've seen it myself in a number of veterans. This investigation may be difficult and dangerous. Some veterans can't function well under those conditions anymore. The doctors call it delayed shell-shock."

Jake felt Grave's intense black eyes on him. Does he know about the flashbacks? Jake thought, trying to keep his eyes from showing what he was thinking. "I can function, General. My knee is reasonably good and my head is okay. I don't have a lot of faith in what doctors say." He paused, feeling that Graves was about to say something. When he didn't, Jake continued. "Was Charlie investigating something special in Omsk? He never said, and we've heard nothing from him at Security for nearly a month."

Sewell glanced at Graves and said, "We don't know what he was doing there, exactly. Communications are very bad. He went there to look into the theft of goods from our trains. You know as well as I that it's reached epidemic proportions. We had information that a highly organized ring is operating all along the line. What he was doing when–."

"Frankly, Jake," Graves cut in, "we don't have much of an idea of current conditions in Omsk. I have ordered most of our people to pull back to be on the safe side, but it's a very confused situation. The Reds have counter-attacked and the Whites are in retreat. Major Sewell believes the Whites are collapsing—that they are corrupt, rotten, and badly led. Am I correct, Major?"

"That is my studied opinion, sir," Sewell said. "I don't think they'll hold Omsk."

"So, Greenberg, you may be a lone salmon going against the current. The nearest U.S. post is the 27th Regiment near Irkutsk. That's nearly 1,200 miles east of Omsk. But we need to know why Ramsey and the others were attacked. There is a major debate at the State Department over our policy toward the Russians. Your report could change some minds about this civil war. Possibly even get Wilson to make a firm decision." Graves

sat down. "You're a civilian and I am not going to order you into a danger zone. Are you still prepared to go?"

"Yes, sir," Jake said. "I'll get my gear and get the first train west."

"Think a moment, Jake. Are you up to it?"

"I'm up to it, sir," Jake said, looking hard at Graves. He knows, Jake said to himself. For a long moment Graves just looked at him. Then he nodded. "All right, Greenberg."

"Thank you, general."

"Warm clothes," Graves said. "Plenty of warm clothes." Graves smiled for the first time.

"There will be a military airplane waiting for you at first light tomorrow. You should be in Omsk in three very uncomfortable days."

The pilot looked back from the front cockpit of the biplane and pointed his gloved hand down. Jake nodded and squinted through his goggles over the side of the two-seater, being careful to stay out of the razor sharp cold of the slip stream. A thousand feet below, the black peaked roof an old mansion appeared to be the only sign of life in the bleak white steppe. He tightened his seat belt. One more landing to go.

He hoped he was up to what was ahead, but he really wasn't sure. He had stopped the heavy drinking, only a beer now and then, but the flashbacks of the war and the nightmares happened far too often. The death of his wife and his young son in the flu epidemic just after he returned home in 1918 had sent him over the edge. Staying drunk was the only way he could cope. It had been nearly a year of what a doctor in Pittsburgh called

"melancholy". People said he would be better after a while, that he'd come to terms with their deaths, whatever that meant. Not yet. Maybe never. Still, he felt he was slowly getting better even though he had had some long down spells when he wondered about his sanity. Working hard and getting completely away from familiar places had helped. He smiled grimly to himself. Nothing could be farther from Pittsburgh than Siberia.

The pilot, a lanky American lieutenant of the Signal Corps, who introduced himself to Jake only as Sam, moved his control stick sharply to the left. In the rear cockpit Jake's stick moved in tandem as the plane banked steeply left. Two biplanes were parked along one side of the big house down below. Beyond the airplanes, a red and white windsock whipped in the wind next to a long flat stretch of snow. Probably somebody's polo field in the old days, Jake thought, before the revolution.

The control stick moved back to center as Sam flew parallel to the field. After three days of landings and takeoffs it was a familiar pattern. Sam had even allowed Jake to handle the controls from the backseat during the long dull stretches of straight and level flying, following the railroad line west. But he was sick of it—the cold open cockpit, the screaming wind through the struts, the nauseating smell of the exhaust that was somehow sucked into the rear cockpit. The little biplane, a two-seater designed for quick missions over the front in France, was a misery for a long trip in Siberia—impossibly uncomfortable wicker seats for a man of his size, and no heat. Yet he would do it all again—it was the fastest way to get to Omsk.

Jake pulled off his right glove and rubbed his nose. Good, he still had feeling. His nose was the only part of his face exposed. He wore a helmet and goggles and had a thick wool scarf

around the lower part of his face. Even with lined boots and a *dokha*, the heavy Siberian coat of samoyed dog skins worn fur side in, the cold seeped in and stayed.

Sam turned left again, and a moment later turned left a third time. They were on the final approach now, heading down toward earth. Jake's eyes shifted to the throttle. Slowly the lever moved backward to idle. The old Liberty engine backfired once, then again, but continued to spin the propeller. Thanks to the watery gasoline they had bought at airfields along the way, it had stank and rattled and backfired all the way from Vladivostok.

They were skimming the surface now, nose high, as Sam felt for the runway. With a thump, the skis attached to the wheels kissed the snow. Jake braced himself, pushing against the edge of the cockpit. He bounced hard against his seat belt as the two-seater bumped and shook over the uneven, hard packed snow. Finally, with a small skid to the right, the plane came to rest on the runway opposite the mansion. As Sam taxied toward the parked airplanes, Jake leaned back and pushed up his goggles. The three longest days of his life were over.

He helped Sam refuel, pouring gasoline from five-liter cans while Sam held the funnel. The wind, which had whipped across the open landing field shaking tree branches near the mansion, had momentarily died, and it had started to snow again, thick flakes coming straight down. The sudden silence after so much wind noise was spooky. "Are you going out in this?" Jake asked.

"Damn right, I am," Sam drawled. "Personally and professionally I want to get the hell out of here." He stuck his finger in the top of the gas tank. "That does it." He screwed on

the cap. "Best of luck, Jake." Sam wiped his hand on his flying suit and shook Jake's hand.

"See you in Vlad," Sam said as he climbed into the front cockpit, slipped his goggles into place, and yelled, "Contact."

"Contact," Jake replied and spun the propeller. The engine caught, and with a hiccup of smoke, roared into life. Jake gave Sam a two-fingered salute and the biplane taxied toward the end of the field. There was still some daylight left and it made sense for him to get away if he could. The anti-communist government of Admiral Kolchak had a habit of requisitioning items like airplanes, railroad cars, or automobiles and paying in nearly worthless White rubles.

The biplane flashed by the mansion and roared into the gray sky. He watched it make a long low turn and quickly disappear from view to the east.

Jake picked up his duffle bag and turned to go into the mansion. Even though it had been a miserable three days, he had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Maybe he was just tired, but he felt hopelessly unequal to whatever was ahead.

The only room that seemed to be in use had an odd mixture of furniture haphazardly scattered around, as if it had been dragged in from other parts of the mansion. There was a wine-red velvet-covered sofa that had seen hard use, a large oval mahogany table that probably graced the dining room, several smaller tables, and an assortment of chairs. Under foot was a rich, but badly stained oriental carpet. All in all, Jake thought, it was better than most of the aerodromes he had been in.

He warmed his hands above a pot-bellied stove, longing for something warm to drink. But the cups around an old samovar

were too filthy to stomach and there didn't seem to be any place to wash them. His bad left knee was stiff and painful. Three days of cold and no movement had taken its toll. He gently moved his leg back and forth, and then he turned and limped to the window. The snow swirled in the revitalized wind. He watched three Russian officers frantically throwing blankets over the open cockpits of their biplanes to keep out the snow.

There was nothing to do now except wait for someone from town. Sam had buzzed the city on the way to the field to announce their arrival, coming in so low Jake held his breath for a few heart-stopping seconds as they skimmed the roof tops.

With the Russians outside, the only other person in the room was an old Chinese man sitting in a wooden chair by a small table. He was staring out into space, relaxed and patient, as if he had been there for awhile and had more waiting ahead. His long thin face was etched with deep vertical lines and he had mere slits for eyes. He wore a heavy, padded Chinese coat, dark pants tucked into thick boots, and a Western fedora. Jake wondered if the man spoke either English or Russian. Jake had been in Vladivostok long enough to pick up some primitive Russian. It was that or live badly, he had found. The U.S. Army fed you and put a roof over your head, but everybody foraged in the street markets for extra food and good winter clothes. Luckily he didn't have to wear a uniform and could buy more practical Russian clothing.

"There is water through that door at the back of the room." The Chinese man's deep voice and excellent English startled Jake. "But I would not use it unless it was thoroughly boiled."

Jake nodded. "Thanks."

"My name is Chen," the man said, tilting his head forward in a little bow. "I am in import and export."

"Greenberg," Jake said. "Army railroad security."

"Ah, an American officer."

"No, I'm a civilian."

"A policeman, then."

"Not exactly."

"Most people are fleeing Omsk," Chen said. "Not many come this way from the east."

"Are you coming or going?" Jake asked to side step the next question from Chen which would surely be, "What are you doing in Omsk?"

Chen smiled a little half smile.

What Jake could see of Chen's hooded eyes sparkled with humor and he had the feeling Chen knew exactly what he had done.

"I am foolish enough to come here," Chen said. "Urgent business. But I will not be staying long, a few days at most." Chen slipped his hands into the long sleeves of his coat. Near the stove it was too warm, while the rest of the room was cold. "My business associates here tell me Omsk is an unpleasant city. Especially so with the war going badly for the Whites. I hope the railroad will be operating. What do you think?"

Jake was too tired from the flight to make more conversation. "I don't know. I've spent all my time in Vladivostok. This is my first trip to Omsk."

"I have seen many Americans in Vladivostok. British and Japanese and French too. But very few this far west. Perhaps nothing can help the Whites."

"I wouldn't know about that."

The old Chinese glanced at him and nodded, but said nothing. From a leather briefcase on the floor next to his foot, he took out a slender cylinder and pulled off the top. Jake watched him take a single stick out and set it aside, then he let the remaining sticks fall on a table in front of him. The man's manicured hands reminded Jake of a pianist's long, well-tended fingers. He divided the sticks randomly into two piles, and then began to separate the pile on his right into groups of four.

"I-Ching," the Chinese said. "Have you heard of it?"

Jake shook his head. "I've not been to China."

"It is Chinese and ancient, but not limited to China. It is used in many parts of the world. It helps to understand changes in one's life. Fate, so to speak. These," he aimed a long finger at the sticks, "are called yarrow sticks. They have been in my family for generations. Would you like a reading."

"The last thing I want to know is my fate."

"So-so," Chen said. "Most Westerners think it is nonsense. However, it gives chance an opportunity to tell us things beyond our control."

Chen turned back to his sticks. "There are fifty sticks. One is pulled out and set aside."

With nothing else to do, Jake kept watch for someone coming from Omsk. Only occasionally did he glance at Chen, who was slowly counting out sticks from each pile into groups of four and putting some to the side. He did this three times, gathering,

counting out groups, and laying aside some. Chen repeated the entire processes five more times each time marking down either a straight line or a broken line depending upon the number of sticks remaining until he had a hexagram. Finally he sat back and studied his markings.

Jake turned from the window. The old Chinese was grim faced as he looked at what he had written. "Am I going to live happily ever after?" Jake asked.

"It is the eighteenth character, Mr. Greenberg. Out of sixty-four. It means corruption. Corruption of authority." Chen studied the hexagram again, running his forefinger up the six lines. "It will be difficult for you to find honor here."

An hour later as the snow stopped Jake heard the bells of a sleigh and was pleased to see a friend, Bill Moden, come up the road from Omsk. Moden was stocky, fair-haired, and looked far younger than his twenty-four years. Jake and Bill had shared a cabin on the SS *Yokohama*, traveling from Tokyo to Vladivostok. Bill, who won his commission as a ninety day wonder when America entered the Great War, was finishing his second year in the Army. Although listed on the rolls as an infantry officer, someone in the War Department discovered that he had majored in Russian. Within a week he was on his way from a comfortable desk job Washington to Omsk.

"So you're the investigator," Bill said as Jake passed his small duffle bag to the driver of the two-horse sleigh and climbed in beside him. "The telegram only said someone would be flying out from Vlad. I had no idea it would be you, Jake. When did you become an investigator?"

"I'm not sure I am one. I've never really done serious detective work. Just some intelligence stuff, checking on potential spies in England. That was good enough for Graves and Sewell, I guess."

"Ever catch any spies?"

"Helped with a couple of cases. Mostly they were just butchers or bakers with German names and nasty neighbors. Anyway, Sewell wants an investigation. I think he's seeing conspiracy against Americans. I was happy to come. Figured I might be able to help Charlie somehow." There was another reason, but he wasn't going to tell Bill.

"We're not loved here," Bill said. "That's for sure. But some plot to kill Americans or foreigners? I don't think so. The Whites have too many other problems. How about a drink?"

"Thanks no. I'm trying to stay off the hard stuff. How's Charlie?"

Bill took a sip from a hip flask, screwed the cap back on, and slipped it into his pocket. "Bad, Jake. Two chest wounds from a pretty large caliber gun, and a couple of serious hits on this head. Left for dead, I guess. McCartle and Montgomery were shot dead. Charlie's still in a coma. It's been over a week. Mumbles sometimes, the doctors say. Seems to almost come out of it, then fades away. The doctors just don't know what to do, I think. But they say he's too weak to move."

"He sure as hell can't get good medical treatment here," Jake said.

"Charlie's getting the best there is in Omsk."

He was tempted to ask which hospital Charlie was in, but decided not to. It would come out soon enough. They rode in

silence for a few minutes. The countryside was a vast blanket of white. Jake remembered asking, "How far is it to the city?" But he didn't recall Bill's answer. Suddenly his eyes felt gritty from fatigue and were too heavy to keep open. All he knew was the jingling harness of the Siberian bays, the tinkling little bell, and the swaying sleigh until he felt someone shake him.

"Almost there. I have some coffee. I haven't learned much out here, but I know never to go out without a gun, some coffee, and a flask."

Jake slowly came out of the fog of sleep and shook his head. "Thanks. I'll take some."

He pulled off his gloves and unscrewed the top of a vacuum bottle. "Ah, real coffee," he said. Using the top of the vacuum bottle as a cup, he filled it with steaming liquid. He drank slowly, savoring the aroma and the deep sugary coffee taste. "Where do you get real coffee in Omsk?"

"No problem, if you have the right kind of money. Dollars or pounds or francs, that is, not rubles. There are places you can buy amazing things here. Everything from decent food to the best antiques. A lot of people—refugees, the military—are selling, and a lot of people are buying. There's a strange end-of-the-world feeling here."

"Sewell thinks the Whites are falling apart."

"From what I hear, it's very bad. The best guess around the Metropole bar is the Whites have a few weeks. You better do what investigating you're going to do pretty fast and get Charlie out of here. A few weeks may be optimistic. There's rumors of a rout. The Whites say they're about to organize a counter-attack. Nobody believes them. Most foreigners are taking the train east."

"What are you doing here?"

"Who knows? I'm on army time, but I'm going like a flash as soon as headquarters tells me. Until then, I'm the senior American officer here. How about that? Me and my command of," he paused, "around twenty guys."

Jake put his head back against the cold leather seat. "We're supposed to have two railroaders in town, Fergerson and Nordheim. I heard back in Vlad they were trying to get the Omsk railroad yard organized."

Bill chuckled. "Yeah, right. The only problem is the Russians don't listen or care. The yard is chaos. Your men gave up a while ago. They're just waiting for orders to head to Irkutsk. Right now they're living snug as two bugs in a fixed up boxcar in the railroad yard. There's over a thousand boxcars in the yard. A lot of them have somebody living in them. And there's a couple of hundred locomotives sitting around. It's a hell of a place."

"I'll talk to my guys as soon as I see Charlie."

Ten minutes later Jake could see shacks and tents on the outskirts of the city.

Bill answered his question before he asked, "Refugees," he said. From all over Russia, running from the Reds. No idea how many. I don't think anyone knows." He lifted both hands, palms up. "A million, maybe more? Bad as these places look, people around here have it pretty good. They have a roof over their heads. Some are living in doorways in town. Try that for awhile in this weather. And prices for everything have gone crazy." He shook his head. "I don't know how they live."

It took another twenty minutes to pass through the belt of hovels before they entered central Omsk.

"Welcome to Kolchak's town, the capital of the Supreme Regent of All the Russias," Bill said, opening his arms in a gesture of welcome. "Or all of Russia that the Bolsheviks haven't taken. This is main street, Alexsandra Prospekt. Just ahead is Governor's Square. Kolchak lives and works from a house near the side of the river, called the Blue House. But most of what really goes on is at Government House. The river, the Irtysh, is over there just beyond that church." He pointed to a large building with three majestic onion-shaped domes. "The big problem now is the river. It's cold enough to snow and have ice floes, but not enough to freeze the river solid. Kolchak's army is on the other side, the western side. If the Reds really pushed hard, they could trap the whole army against the river. There are also a few hundred thousand refugees camped on the other side of the Irtysh waiting for the freeze. And only one permanent bridge, that's the railroad bridge. There's a steady stream of people picking their way over the ties and the catwalk, but that's just a trickle. The other bridges are sort of wooden pontoons. They get pulled to the shore when the ice floes start moving. If they didn't the ice would mash them. So everyone—Kolchak's army and all the refugees—wait for the river to freeze. And the freeze is late. I've heard their top brass are really worried."

"Yes, but when the river freezes and the army can get across, so can the Reds. There's no natural barrier to stop them for a thousand miles to the east. Believe me, I feel like I've seem every inch of it."

"That's right. If Kolchak's boys can't hold here, it'll be a long, very cold walk east."

Alexsandra Prospekt was a wide, snow-covered street filled with sleighs and work sleds pulled by small, rugged-looking Siberian horses snorting out plumes of condensation. Along each side of the street were stone and log buildings two or three stories high. Every window had thick glass and wooden shutters, which reminded Jake how bone-breaking cold it could get in the middle of Siberia.

"This is the best season, believe it or not," Bill said. "In spring, the street is ankle deep in mud, and in summer and fall the dust is unbelievable. I've been here six months and you can't possibly believe how eager I am to get out and go home."

"That girl still waiting for you?"

Bill shrugged. "Hard to tell. One of those situations where the letters are getting shorter and coming less often."

Jake studied the crowd on the wooden sidewalks set a foot or so above street level. Scattered among the men and women wearing thick gray padded coats or mounds of rags, were men in uniforms so gaudy they reminded Jake of a comic opera. With them were women in bright coats and flamboyant hats that had been fashionable a few years back.

"Most on the sidewalks are refugees," Bill said. "They came here, 1,800 miles from Moscow, to escape the Reds. Hard to believe, but those people were once the cream of society." He shook his head. "They have some stories, let me tell you. The fancy uniform boys you see are staff officers. Kolchak has God-knows how many. All pretty much worthless parasites as far as I can tell. They're part of the White's problem. Kolchak has surrounded himself with guys who care a lot about their rank and privileges and don't give a damn about the troops in the

field. The well-dressed ladies are their wives or girlfriends. The staff boys live pretty well."

Half a dozen dirty-faced little boys ran up to the sleigh begging for coins before the driver chased them off with a crack of his whip.

"Lots of that here now," Bill said.

They passed through Governor's Square, a rectangle with a snow-covered park in the middle, surrounded by drab gray stone government buildings.

"Before Kolchak set up the White government here, Omsk was a provincial capital. Lord knows why he chose this place."

"Maybe he liked the idea of the river to his east," Jake said. "Without ice and only one real bridge, it probably was the best defensive spot for a thousand miles. Believe me. It *is* the middle of nowhere."

Jake was struck by the sheer foreign-ness of the place—the refugees, the brutal climate, the stark isolation of the provincial town, and it's aura of gloom. What, he wondered, made him think he could do any good out here? He looked around and sighed. At least he could get Charlie back to what passed for civilization. "Could you send a telegram to Vlad? Tell them I made it."

Bill nodded. "Sure. I've plenty of time. Not much use for a language officer these days. Major Gordon closed the liaison office last week and left town." Bill paused. "The Bolshies are going to win. No doubt about it."

The driver guided the bays to the right, into a smaller, but very busy commercial street of more modest one story shops, restaurants, and houses. Work sleds piled high with goods and

sleighs filled the narrow street that was deeply rutted with dark, hard-packed snow. The driver cursed and maneuvered between the traffic and the sleds unloading at the sidewalks. Filthy snow was piled along the edge of the street. In this part of town, refugees far outnumbered fancy uniforms.

"Go a little way along here and you get into shabby pretty fast, lots of hovels and tents."

A rag-tag military unit, about a hundred men, including some walking wounded, marched by in the opposite direction, led by a gaunt officer on an exhausted horse.

"That was probably once a regiment," Bill commented. "Looks like they've had a hard time of it."

Pitiful looking troops, Jake thought. Some were almost in rags, more like refugees with guns than fighting men. Defeat was written on their blank faces as they marched by.

"The Whites treat their troops like dogs," Bill said quietly. "A lot of them run away or go over to the Reds."

"I suppose their hospitals are bad too?" Jake asked.

"Terrible. Luckily, we got Charlie in the Red Cross hospital."

Jake grunted. He didn't want to show any interest in the Red Cross. It would lead to questions he didn't want to answer.

"The RC has the best one around. There's some RC medical staff in it too, but it's mostly a Russian operation. We got Charlie a room by himself, which was something very special. But the White's medical people have more than they can handle and have very little in the way of medicines."

"I know most of the medical stuff gets stolen en route," Jake said, "along with everything else. We see the numbers back in

Vlad," he said, steering the conversation away from the Red Cross hospital. "It's amazing. Only about ten percent of what is sent from Vlad arrives. They'll steal anything.

"You get used to it. We sometimes buy back our own medicine in the market. The Red Cross does it too, when it can. But not much has shown up recently and what is for sale is so expensive it's like gold."

"What do the police say about the ambush in the rail yard?"

"Nothing. And nothing's likely to happen. The police don't care. They claim it was a robbery gone wrong. Anyway, they only care about catching deserters." Bill paused. "Say, do you have a gun?"

Jake nodded. "A .45, army-issue."

"Keep it with you. There's not much law and order here."

"Were Charlie and the others actually robbed?"

"No," Bill said. "The police said the thieves were probably scared off." He shook his head. "They all had money and watches on them. Hell, Montgomery even had his passport in his pocket. Nothing seemed to be missing. You have three guys lying in the snow. Two dead and one nearly dead and the shooters didn't take a second or two to check their pockets. Not in this town."

"I know Charlie is pretty closed mouth about his work, but what do you think he was up to?"

"All I know is that he was not in that part of the yard for fun. It's bad territory."

"Maybe he told Harvey, the State Department man."

"Charlie and I worked well together on a bunch of things. If he wouldn't tell me, it's not likely he'd tell Harvey," Bill said. "And he wouldn't tell Major Gordon anything. Gordon and Charlie didn't get along too well." He paused as if unsure what to say. "Say, Jake, if you need any help, I'd be glad to lend a hand. I've not a damned thing to do and I speak the language like a native."

"Do you carry?"

"Sure do," Bill said. "A little Webley .32. Bought it from a Brit the second week I was here."

"Ever fire the thing?"

"Not once. If it comes to that, I plan to run like hell."

"You'll do fine."

Winter, 1919, Siberia in the chaos of the Russian Civil War. Jake Greenberg, investigating the murder of three Americans, escapes on the last train from Omsk on the Transsiberian RR, fighting blizzards, and partisans, while hunting the murderer on board.

The Last Train