

Chapter One

It was mid-August and the heavy summer rains were still in play, although at the early hour of this particular morning the new sun was shining brightly. The air outside was only warm and humid now but by the afternoon it would be hot and sweltering if yesterday was any indicator. But right then Borya was indoors, sitting on his chair at his private table at Mama Melnikov's Tea Room on a corner of Kataiskaya Street. The table was reserved for him every morning and evening whether he showed up or not, selected for its best view up and down two of the major streets of Harbin's Pristan district, or Daoli to the Chinese. It was an unobstructed window on the world, or rather his little corner of the world. Like many busy commercial districts in major cities around the world, traffic was already beginning to stir on Kataiskaya Street. Swift motorcars and the occasional motor-coach dominated the inside lanes, weaving around plodding horse-carts and dare-devil rickshaws. Where the sun found ingress between the two-and-three storey buildings it cast dark lines across the storefronts, shadows from the spiderweb of overhead electrical and phone wires. Borya watched as the lines visibly crawled down the buildings toward the sidewalk as the sun rose higher.

But Pristan was unique and Harbin like no other city in the whole world. 1929 Harbin was the quintessential cosmopolitan city—more than Paris, more than London, maybe more than New York City. Here Russian tailor shops sit side-by-side with Chinese dry goods stores, Korean restaurants, and Japanese brothels, displaying a cacophony of languages in

their signage, many in two or three. Chinese men in jangly-bright robes and Russian businessmen in dark suits share the sidewalks with knots of tittering, kimonoed prostitutes under the watchful eyes of burly minders. European and American businessmen and Soviet railway officials scurry past. But it wasn't just the dynamic tableau of different cultures and races meeting—sometimes mixing, often competing—that made it cosmopolitan, it was also the interplay between modernity and the traditional, European empiricism and Asian spirituality.

It could have been a recipe for chaos if there hadn't been a stronger undercurrent for order and control. A Russian predilection for organization and the Chinese desire for harmony created an uneasy marriage of convenience to provide a solid social order. Borya watched as a Chinese traffic cop managed the busy intersection with whistles and sweeping hand gestures. Across the intersection a Russian-speaking Chinese policeman paired with a Chinese-speaking Russian policeman of Harbin's Special District force passed by in their matching black uniforms. Both were fellow police officers Borya knew well. And here in Harbin criminals and litigants face Russian law in Chinese courts, defended by either Russian or Chinese lawyers and an army of translators.

Not that there wasn't crime and the occasional social unrest. Just within eyesight Borya watched as a Chinese youth in rags jostled a Russian man on the sidewalk and removed his wallet undetected behind the backs of the passing patrolmen. Borya could have run to the tearoom's door and called out to the on-duty patrolmen, but the Russian's cheap suit marked him likely a Soviet railway worker or manager and so he did not feel motivated. A one-eyed Chinese man in rags with a begging bowl sat in the sidewalk in front of a tailor's shop, maybe spending his few copper coins on opium that night in the Fujiadian district.

But like any city with with so many elements in play, change had been inexorable. In the beginning the Russians dominated, bringing the railroad

and their unequal treaties and creating the city of Harbin. Then revolution and civil war brought down the Imperial Russian government and thousands of refugees from across the Russian Empire fled to Harbin. The local Chinese took the reins of power rather than let it fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks and now even the street signs and dominant shop signage were required to be in Mandarin. But now the Bolsheviks were back, trying to reclaim the control of the railroad and Harbin and in the working districts around Pristan. Soviet agitators stirred up class struggle, sometimes fostering alliances across the races of the workers, other times dividing them. Borya missed seeing the Cyrillic letters everywhere and still called the streets and neighborhoods by their old Russian names, but at the same time applauded the Chinese civic leaders and the Young Marshal, Chang Hsueh-liang, for standing up to the Bolsheviks.

But for all its imperfections and challenges, Harbin was *his* city. Not just because he had lived here all of his twenty years, but because their souls were somehow intertwined. With a Russian father and Korean mother he felt, like the city, a blend of logic and the mystical, the West and the Orient. He was like *Moia-tvoia*, the Russo-Chinese pidgin that was the language of Harbin's streets and commerce, a mix of the disparate elements of the city that came together to help create a collective soul, and Borya was like a microcosm of that soul. And, as his Korean grandfather had told him, this gave him the vision to see into many worlds at once. But that could be both a blessing and a curse as it sometimes left him with too many choices on which vision to believe and which to follow.

But there was other faces of Harbin too, after all there you can't form a composite element without separate components. Outside the mixed districts of commercial Pristan and the worker tenements of District 8 there was New Town with its White Russian and European bureaucrats and its wealthy Chinese Christian converts. And then there was Chinese Fujiadian with its overcrowding, a few rich merchants and many more poor.

Each were their own distinct neighborhoods and with their own cultural associations. But despite his partly Slavic features and Russian accent, Borya didn't belong in New Town, and likewise he felt an outsider in Chinese Fujiadian. So, rather than resign himself to being an outsider in any of the city's streets and neighborhoods Borya pledged his citizenship to the city as a whole. And to his family, both Russian and Korean.

Borya didn't rank his own table at the window of the tearoom because he was a Special District policeman, and a lowly one at that, but because the owner, "Mama" Melnikov, was his aunt. Not a real aunt, but she was his father's cousin and she insisted Borya call her *Tatushka*, Auntie, and she made her tearoom his home away from home. Following the death of his father Sergei Vladimirovich he had lost all of his Russian family ties in Harbin except for Auntie Melnikov, who had no children of her own. It was she who encouraged him to keep his ties to the city's Russian community through his school and Church activities. These activities were, of course, all in White Russian organizations, founded by the refugees who fled across the border to Harbin to escape Bolshevism.

Borya had no place in his life or heart for the Soviet Russians that had been sent to Harbin to work in the Chinese Eastern Railway offices, rail-yards, warehouses, and workshops. The Soviets had taken over the Russian share of the partnership in the railroad with the Chinese government in 1924 following the final defeat of the White Russian Siberian forces and the conclusion of the Russian Civil War. Then in 1925, four years ago, his father was part of the purge of non-Soviet Russian employees at the CER, as the railway was known. Never mind that he had worked for the railroad for almost twenty years, starting long before the Revolution. He was one of the many stateless Russians who had neither a Soviet nor Chinese passport, not that his father would have ever accepted a Soviet passport, being a

diehard monarchist. And not that the Soviets would have given him a passport anyway since his father's brother had fought and died in the Nechaev Brigade, a body of Russian mercenaries from Harbin who helped fight the Chinese communists in Shantung province of China.

It would be almost two years after his firing and only after hunger strikes and the attention of the world press that the CER finally gave his father and the other fired Russian workers a pittance of the pensions they had earned. Long before that his parents' savings had been depleted and his father was forced to take a job as a supervisor at the Tianxingfu No. 4 flour mill in Harbin's Fujiadian district. There he was in charge of their coal-fired boilers at half the pay he had earned overseeing a whole team of workers at the CER that inspected and repaired the steam boilers of the railway's locomotives. It was at the flour mill that his father died when one of the steam boilers exploded, the result of slipshod maintenance done in the shift prior to his. Borya blamed the flour mill owners for putting profit before proper maintenance, but he also blamed the Soviets for leaving his father no option other than taking such a dangerous position in the first place. Of course the flour mill provided only token death benefits and once again the family quickly ran out of savings, and his mother moved Borya and his two sisters from their modest apartment in Pristan to a cramped two room apartment in District 8, partly for the cheaper rent but also to be closer to her own father's herbal medicine shop and the larger Korean community there.

Despite the longer walk, Borya stayed true to his father's legacy and continued to make the trek up the bluff to New Town and St. Nicolas Cathedral almost every Sunday for Mass with Auntie Melniknov. Here he found comfort in the old familiar rituals, and in the chants and the hymns he heard again the same words his father used to repeat at home. It helped keep the tone of his father's voice and the image of his face from fading in Borya's memory. He would remember other times when the church was

crowded and he would end up sitting in some pew behind his father and that he could always recognize him from the peculiar way his head sat low between hunched shoulders and the small pink bald patch on the crown of his head, the latter the subject of a family joke as his father always denied its existence since he could not see it himself.

Only a teenager when he had lost his father, Borya had had a hard time reconciling himself to his death. The funeral had been at the St. Nicolas Cathedral and was well attended by former co-workers from the railroad and the Russian and Korean communities. Borya remembered little of that ceremony except the crying of his mother and sisters and the closed casket. He was told there would be no viewing of the body possible because the catastrophic nature of his death prevented any restoration efforts. But that allowed Borya to imagine that there might have been a case of mistaken identity; in the chaos of the accident another body had been misidentified as his father. Maybe his father was actually in hiding, targeted by the malicious Soviet CER managers that hadn't been satisfied with merely firing him. For months afterwards Borya refused to sit at the dinner table unless there was a place set for his father. But as the years passed he wondered why his father hadn't at least gotten word to him and his mother. Still, on the streets of the city his heart would still leap whenever he saw from afar a man with hunched shoulders or a bald patch, only to run to catch up to them and find they were only a stranger.

After his father's death his aunt let him stake out the small table as his own as a sort of refuge. When he wasn't at the tearoom the waiters upended the two chairs onto the table so no one else could use it except on busy days when all the other tables were occupied. There as a student he would pore over his beloved history and geography texts at the small round table, nurse his cold tea and practice his Mandarin with the busboys and his Japanese with a few of those that were regular customers. When he was struggling with his detested physics, chemistry or math texts he would let his eyes

wander to the windows and watch the pedestrians and horse carts and the occasional motorcar go by. But before Borya had finished his final year he knew his mother was having trouble providing both food and making the meager rent on their District 8 apartment and he quit school to find a means of contributing to the family expenses. There were still friends of his father from the CER and St. Nicholas who provided him references enough to land a position of police cadet with the Special District Police, helped by his language fluency in Russian, Mandarin, and Korean. His mother was unhappy that he left school, but also appreciated the contribution of his small paychecks to the family finances. She was even happier when just months later he was promoted to Officer First Rank and brought home a slightly larger paycheck. Auntie Melnikov also was disappointed he had interrupted his schooling, and insisted he use his reserved table to continue studying his textbooks on his own. Besides, she confided, it didn't hurt business to have a policeman in uniform on the premises to give the customers a greater sense of safety than on the busy city streets outside.

But just as this spot was Borya's window on the world, in turn the pedestrians could look his way through the glass, watching him bent over his books or else looking back at them. Most just saw the wavy dark brown hair that he got from his father and figured him just another Russian Kharbintsy. Others looked closer and saw his Korean mother's asian eyes and figured him one of the city's "mongrels" or maybe the product of one of Russia's central Asian provinces. Borya learned to stare back with a detached look like he was the one on the outside and looking into a cage at a zoo and they were the animals on display. Some looked quickly away, others matched him stare for stare until they walked out of sight, and then there were those that he knew or had grown accustomed to seeing him sitting there that smiled his way and he would smile back. And if they were pretty girls he might even smile at them first, startling them into glancing shyly away or erupting into muffled giggles. He learned he had a decent face, and looking

neither distinctly Russian nor Korean he had a certain exotic look with a high, clean forehead and strong brows over almond eyes, but of a startling grey color. Normally he was shy, but somehow the barrier of glass allowed him a degree of separation that made his presumptive smiles seem less real. And besides, nothing ever came from such vicarious flirtations.