

Chapter 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.

Chapter 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, 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.