

Chapter 1

Tajikistan, 1945



The State University of Leningrad? How could this be possible? I stare at the school principal with disbelieving eyes. This was not something I had even dared to dream of in my wildest fantasies. Could the dark clouds of the past years actually have a silver lining? The principal reassures me.

‘Tanya, you have worked extremely hard and earned your place. I have no doubt that you will do well.’

My family and I had reached Tajikistan after a long and harrowing journey, exchanging the freezing cold of the Arctic north for the tropical heat of central Asia. To my dismay, by the time we arrived I had already missed the beginning of the school year, and anyway I was needed to help at home while Papa looked for work locally and further afield.

After several months, Papa had made enough money to engage a private tutor for me, a Jewish academic who had taught in a Polish university before the war. An elderly, balding man with thick glasses and a bushy mustache, he was a stern, but very interesting figure, and an excellent teacher. Throughout the summer months, I invested all my energies in study, spending several hours a day with ‘the Professor’, as I called him. His clear and concise presentation of the material prepared me well for the exams which I had to pass in order to be accepted into the final grade of senior school.

I struggled. The heat was oppressive and unrelenting, making concentration almost impossible. In the evenings, when there was some respite, I had to read by the dim light of a kerosene lamp since we had no electricity, and this quickly tired my eyes. The neighborhood in which we lived was bordered by fields and apple orchards, irrigated by water channels which flowed in close proximity to the houses. I would often take my books to a nearby grove, and study with my feet dangling in the cool water in an attempt to gain a little relief from the heat. The nights, too, were overwhelmingly hot. Sleeping indoors was impossible. Hauling my mattress up to the roof, I wrapped myself in netting for protection from the ever-hungry mosquitos and all manner of crawling insects, which emerged at night from their breeding ground in the irrigation channels. They buzzed annoyingly in

my ears making sleep elusive, so that I was in a permanent a state of exhaustion. How could I possibly pass the exams?

With the Professor's encouragement and dedication I did pass, much to my surprise and delight, and I sailed through the final year of school with excellent grades, culminating in my meeting with the principal today.

Clutching the letter affirming my place at the university, I run home and burst into the house barely able to contain my excitement. And then I see that Papa's face wears an expression I have come to recognize only too well, whenever he is planning to uproot us. Before I have the chance to share my news, he declares, 'The war is over. It is time to go home.'