



## Chapter 1

Kat Moore stared ahead at the customs control booth and tightened her grip on the brass key in her jacket pocket. The key's teeth bit into her palm's soft flesh, but the pain shot courage into her veins.

She lifted her chin. Her journey, the one she'd waited for her entire life, could come to a smacking halt in about ten steps.

She tore her gaze away from the steely eyes of a Russian passport official and tried to find comfort in the faces of the other passengers. No one smiled or even met her gaze. Their stoic expressions stiffened a muscle in her neck.

The passengers from the KLM plane stretched in a haphazard line down a chipped, gray hallway in Sheremetova 2, Moscow's International Airport. The smells of cement, dirt, and fatigue hovered like the presence of Big Brother.

A stiff wind, leftover from some iceberg north of St. Petersburg, whistled in through the metal hanging doors and kicked up dust. Kat pulled her jacket around her and mentally flogged the person who'd written "warm and sunny in June," in her travel guidebook. They would probably describe the Arctic as "mildly chilly on overcast days."

The line moved one step forward. Kat shoved her backpack along the floor with a toe, just escaping a nudge from the young lady behind her, the one wrapped in a black leather jacket and sporting a fake blonde hairpiece.

Nine more steps. Kat's stomach tangled and she fought her racing heartbeat.

She'd obviously checked her sanity, along with her baggage, back in New York City. The shadows coloring the gray stucco walls did nothing to argue that point. This dungeon's gloom, barely fractured by a high-hanging chandelier, even barred entry to the rose-colored dawn she'd seen creeping over the eastern Moscow skyline as they landed. Kat couldn't delete the image that ran through her mind of prisoners lining up for execution.

Dust hung like Spanish moss from the ceiling, a steel canopy of what looked like discarded shell casings of a bygone war, and sent chills up her spine. "God, I sure hope you can still see me, because I could use a friend right now."

She should have listened to Matthew. He was her common sense, the weight that kept her from taking off with her dreams. "You go hunting up the past, you'll just find trouble." His voice reverberated like a bass drum through her mind as she stared heavenward.

What had possessed her to think she could traipse around a country that still sent shivers down her spine when she heard the hiss of the word, "Russhhha?" Shivers, yes, and curiosity. Somewhere, Mother Russia secreted her family tree. The key in her pocket would unlock the mystery.

If Grandfather had been just a smidgen more forthcoming about the secrets surrounding her Neumann ancestors, perhaps she wouldn't be trying to resurrect her rusty Russian and dog-eared the pages of her passport with her thumb. Edward Neumann had always been a miser with answers to her questions like, "How did Grandmother die?" or "Did she have caramel colored hair, like me and Mommy?" Of course, twenty years later, she discovered why he dodged her inquiries with the agility of a rugby player. Not that the new information ebbed her flow of questions.

However impossible, her mother had inherited her Grandfather's stubborn streak, the one that kept Kat out of every meaningful conversation-especially the ones that ended with muttered phrases like, "she's too young," or "it's too dangerous."

Now, as she looked for light in the overhead shadows, she wondered if they both hadn't been right.

The line moved forward. Kat dodged the woman breathing down her neck, and nearly kicked her backpack into the heels of the well-dressed man in front of her. Tall and muscular in a black trench coat, he looked about fifty. Turning, he glanced at her pack, then at her, his dark brown eyes harsh. He wore his shoulder-length, gray-streaked black hair combed back from the deep forehead of someone with Slavic descent.

A blush burned Kat's cheeks. She offered an apologetic smile.

To her amazement, he smiled back, little lines crinkling around his eyes as he did it. "No problem," he said in English.

Relief poured through Kat. "Thank you." She flicked a look at the customs official. "Have you done this before?"

He gave a wry chuckle. "Too many times." A foreign accent laced his English, enough to give it an intriguing lilt. "Don't worry. The trick is to look past them. Fix on a spot behind their heads and, whatever you do, don't smile."

"Why not?"

He grinned and leaned close. "Smilers have a reason to smile. . .and usually it isn't a good one."

Kat nodded, eyes wide. Okay, so she still had a few things to learn about international travel. She thought she'd prepped pretty well. Russian guidebooks, novels, history textbooks, and insights into the Russian culture crammed her bookshelf in her Nyack apartment. She'd taken a refresher course in Russian and discovered that the language of her great-grandparents came back like an echo. She'd even purchased a travel water filter, designed to keep Russia's bacteria out of her veins. But nowhere did it tell her not to smile. Her hand tightened around the key.

The line moved forward. Kat's heart moved up into her throat. She tried to swallow it down as the customs officer's glance settled on her. She stared at her new hiking boots, hoping she didn't look somehow suspicious.

If only she'd inherited the Russian chutzpah that made her grandfather a World War II hero--a status he'd quickly deny. The Medal of Honor he kept tucked away in his nightstand probably had something to do with his stash of secrets. . .ones she was well on her way to unwrapping.

In her heart, she knew when she opened the rumpled package with the Russian return address that it held the key to her past. She just couldn't believe her eyes when an actual key fell out.

The brass key had already opened doors.

She'd certainly seen something drop from Grandfather's face when she read the return address: T. Petrov, from a monastery somewhere near Pskov, Russia, posted over a year prior and littered with more than a dozen different postmarks. And, when he'd met her at the airport and handed her a yellowing photograph, she'd glimpsed a sadness in his eyes so profound, her heart wept. Grandfather always said he'd lost his heart in the war, but she'd never seen the agony of his loss until that day.

Kat had memorized the old photo on the eternal flight over the ocean, hoping to see herself in one of the faces. Two women stood next to a grave, one of them supposedly a distant relation of hers. Their faces were drawn, as if they'd just buried a child or a father. The words written in Russian on the back, gave no clues even when translated into modern day English.

For the Lord is good and His love endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generations. --Psalm 100.

## Ekaterina Sample/Susan May Warren & Susan K. Downs

Perhaps, between the picture and the key, she'd find what she'd longed for her entire life-her family tree, her ancestors, her heritage.

The man in front of her stepped over the yellow line to the passport control booth. Kat hauled up her backpack, flung it over her shoulder, narrowly missing the beauty behind her, and shuffled up to the painted yellow boundary. One more step and she'd cross over into the past. She already felt like she'd stepped into a time warp, perhaps a World War II action movie, complete with soldiers wielding AK-47's and clad in iron gray uniforms. She wondered what it would be like to work as a spy or a covert operator in a foreign country.

Wouldn't Matthew cringe if he knew her thoughts? As an ER doc, Matthew's idea of off-hour's adventure consisted of ordering green peppers and onions on his plain pepperoni pizza. She smiled, then quickly smothered it, lest one of the storm troopers decide to take her expression as a villainous sign. Still, the image of Matthew tickled a place inside her as she pictured his always-perfect grin dimmed at the thought of his innocent little girlfriend longing for a life of adventure. No, make that ex-girlfriend, as of two days ago.

"Slyedushi!"

Kat swallowed hard at the command of the beefy soldier standing next to the booth. Scraping up her composure, she stepped forward and shoved her passport through the slitted portal in the thick glass. A wide-faced woman snatched the document up without so much as a nod of acknowledgment to Kat.

Don't smile. Don't smile. She stared at the passport official. . .at her chubby hands leafing through Kat's empty passport. . .at her bushy gray frown as she scrutinized Kat's visa picture. The woman looked up to compare Kat's appearance to the photo. Kat met her gaze with a blank face and congratulated herself.

"Purpose of your visit to Russia?" The woman's wide cheeks jiggled when she talked. Kat blinked, and searched for her voice.

"Uh, personal," she stammered.

The stamper clinked, and a purple circle appeared on the second page of Kat's passport. The woman handed it over. "Enjoy your stay in Russia."

Kat gathered her papers and held them to her chest, over her pounding heart. Yes, oh yes. . .

"Zis way." The uniformed soldier gestured to a security scan.

Kat thumped her backpack onto the rolling belt and stepped up to the scanner. She watched her bag pass through, then received a nod from the attendant.

Enter, she thought as she stepped under the gates , your past, .

The harsh screech of the security siren stopped her heart cold.

She froze under the arch. The siren blared. Two security officials marched toward her.

The soldier behind them swung his gun off his shoulder.

Then, a hand closed around her arm, yanking her back the way she'd come.

"Zis way, please."

She looked up into the cold gray eyes of the Russian militia.