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opening extract from

The Road of Bones

written by

Anne Fine

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Chapter One

My grandmother said it each time. I see her standing beside the cracked iron stove my father half-killed himself in dragging home. In would come the news. 'Chechov is gone.' 'Kerentz has fallen from favour.' 'It seems that Dolov has most conveniently had a "heart attack".' She'd snort with contempt and mutter bitterly into the pots she stirred.

'Only a fool cheers when the new prince rises.'

For years I mistook her meaning. I'd listened to her tales of fair princesses and malignant dwarves, and knew all the old stories about good-hearted giants and ice-crystal palaces hidden in mountainsides. So though I heard it often, her tart remark echoed only in the magically lit cave of my imagination. Gradually the image rose of some young prince rising, freshly crowned, from his throne, and I thought my grandmother was saying no more than that the new ruler's subjects were supposed to know their part of the ceremony was to stay on their knees.

And weren't we all good at that! My father

grumbled to my mother constantly. 'Could we be forced to scrape lower? See? We are beaten to the ground.'

She'd hush him. 'Grigor, I beg you! Not so the boy can hear! And never outside.' For even then there were whispers that people vanished on the way to work, and no one saw and no one heard.

And no one ever came back.

'That,' said my father, 'is because you'd grow a beard down to your feet even in getting there.' ('There' being the far north-east, above the great dividing range and over the frozen bays of Kolskaya and Vlostok, where even the fishing stops for half the year as the waters ice over.) Grandmother would shrug. To her, one prison camp sounded much like another. And to a woman who had never left our province, all places seemed as far away and no further than where the sun sets over the Chelya hills. She'd scrape the skeins of grey mould off the last turnips with a blackened fingernail, and tell for the thousandth time the story that always left her wheezing with amusement, and me in shudders of distress.

'No need to tell the Kulik twins how far to those camps. Poor souls. Alike as two nuts on a twig, but oh, so different inside. Victor now, he was like Yuri

here.' She'd tip her thumb at me. 'All ears. All eyes. And always "Why this?", "Why that?" Oh yes, young Victor's brains whirred round all day. But it was Stephan who was the apple of his mother's eye. A soft lad. His only thought was to get down to the river to fish.'

I'd sit with my head well down over my school-book, willing my grandmother to scald herself or cut her finger – anything, even spill the thin soup, rather than go on with the story.

'Then the Czar's men came to arrest young Victor. So there he stood, this captain, reading to Victor's mother from the charge sheet, and she not understanding a word, of course, not being bright or schooled. And he looked up to see her staring at him, all slack-mouthed and drooling from utter fright. "Sedition," he said again, and then took pity on her. "Bare-arsed rebellion," he explained. "Undermining the Czar's authority." '

I hated the story so much, I wanted its telling over. 'So off the soldiers went—'

'So off the soldiers went, to find young Victor. But no one was helpful. Some of the villagers did go as far as murmuring that Victor's twin brother might be down at the river, fishing as usual. But where the lad the soldiers had come to arrest might be, no one

would even venture an opinion, for fear they might be right.'

I'd worked out years ago that everyone in the story had to be dead by now. But still my stomach churned.

'And in the end, of course, the captain lost patience. Three hours out of a morning, to find a boy who couldn't grow a beard. "Go fetch the other one," he told his men. And they rode down to the river and took poor Stephan – and his fine fish, they say – and carried him off. Three days later, young Victor came home. His foolish mother must have spat toads at him. "This is your fault! All your fine speeches in the market place! All your petitions and meetings!" Lord knows what curses she must have heaped on his head. All I can tell you is that, within a day, the boy had left the village – gone off to find his brother and exchange himself.'

Again, she'd snort.

'And neither ever came home. More fool their mother!'

For Grandmother, this was the end of a very fine story. She'd cackle away, thinking Victor and his mother prize dolts. (And, as she said so often whenever I cracked a plate or let the fire go out, 'No need to sow fools. Like weeds, they come up of their own

accord.') She didn't think, as I did, that maybe Victor had come home, not to a heap of curses, but only to his mother's tears. It never occurred to her that a young man who cared enough about justice and fairness to risk his liberty speaking his mind in the market place and handing out pamphlets might follow his brother willingly over the frozen wastes to try to save him from seven long years of drudgery he hadn't earned for himself.

So I was used to tales of men and women who slid away from towns and villages and hid from the Czar's men for years and years. Some of her stories worried me. But till I went to school, Grandmother's memories of life in her village were much the same to me as tales of pirates and highwaymen and bandits. After all, the Czar was long gone – his throat slit and his family scattered even before the Five Great Leaders signed the Republic into life. ('A fine day!' grinned my father. 'We fooled the class simpleton into believing that all the firecrackers and the flags were there to celebrate his thirteenth birthday.')

In any case, ill luck could fall on anyone. Even in my class at school, there was poor Vladimir with his useless, crippled legs, sweet-natured Ludmilla with her endlessly suppurating face, and Fyodor Kalinsky,

whose family all died of cholera within a week, leaving him so shocked and dumb he earned a beating daily.

'A few simple words!' our teacher would howl at him, his nostrils flaring red with rage and frustration. 'Can you not march in time and get a few simple words in the right order?'

We'd raise the banners and start to practise the anniversary procession again.

'On this great day, we hail Our Beloved Leaders, and step out willingly on the Long March to a Better Future for All.'

Fyodor would only tremble. At times, his tears ran. Sometimes his face became so blank you'd think he'd gone deaf as well as silent. In the end, one of the other teachers would pull him aside and leave him standing while we marched briskly up and down on the packed snow, and Fyodor froze faster than his banner.

Those banners! Half our lesson time was taken up with cutting them out and printing the words. Before I was even seven, I swear I could spell "The Glorious Revolution". ('"The Glorious *Lie*", more like,' my grandmother muttered with a scowl the day they told us that part of our family's contribution to the Next Steps for Progress was to

share the floor of our block with three other families.)

So there was always schoolwork to do in the evenings to make up for the hours spent on our flags and parades. And nowhere to do it away from Grandmother and her stories. I suppose that, to someone standing stirring away the rest of her life, old times are all that's left. So as I sat over our brand-new history book, learning about all the countries around us that had welcomed our soldiers with songs of liberation and bright spring flowers, her witterings dripped into my brain. I didn't listen, but every few minutes my ears would unstop enough to hear yet another snippet from Grandmother's village childhood.

'And by the time he was released, of course, his mother was dead.'

'After seven years, she despaired and married someone else, only for him to arrive the next morning, footsore and bleeding.'

'And he never came back.'

'Stop with the tales!' I remember my mother once begging her. 'Just for one night, can we sit and eat without the troubles of the world heaped on our plates as well?' She looked at my father as if to say, 'Support me here, Grigor. This is *your* mother, not mine.'

But he was flicking through *The Wonderful Story of Our Motherland*, his eyebrows raised. 'Is this what they're telling you now? Our soldiers welcomed with songs and flowers?' Dropping his voice to a whisper, he turned to my mother. 'Best not tell Grandmother! Or she might wonder what sort of flower it was that blew out her husband's brains.'

'Hush, Grigor! Not in front of Yuri!'

But I'd been deaf so often from colds and agues when I was smaller that they were easily fooled by a blank face. And as soon as they thought I was asleep under the rugs, their whisperings would start again – and these were not old tales like Grandmother's, but things that had happened only that day to some journalist who had written of one of the Five Great Leaders with too sharp a pen, or to the editor of some journal called *New Directions* or *A Better Path.*

One night the news came from so close to home, my mother couldn't wait for a prudent time to tell it. Seeing my hands were over my ears as usual while I was reading, she risked saying softly to my father, 'Novgorod's gone.'

'Novgorod?'

'Yesterday evening, they came.' She shook the snow crystals from her headscarf towards the fire, making it hiss and spit. 'Through a mercy his boys

had gone off early, so there was only him beside the printing press. The guards broke up the type. Natasha says he smashed his own spectacles trying to stop them. And then two of the taller ones lifted poor Novgorod between them, arm in arm, and carried him off. Natasha's mother said his legs were so far off the ground he looked like a child refusing to go to the priest for a blessing.'

My father frowned. Since all the churches had been sacked and locked, even second-hand talk of priests was unwelcome. 'Any word from him since?'

'Nothing. He shouted down the empty street, of course. "Keep up the work! Keep up the work!"' She stared at the one smoking ember in the grate and added bitterly, 'A fine message to leave the neighbours to pass to your sons. Practically a death sentence.'

My father tried to comfort her. 'No, no. Their mother won't let them take the risk. She was against the business of the journal from the start.'

They shook their heads, and spoke of passing the news to friends the very next morning. And as the tale of Novgorod's arrest spread out from those who knew each other well to those who barely nodded in the street, no doubt fewer and fewer dared venture the general opinion: 'What sort of

idiot can't tell the difference between the "right to publish" and a steel-capped boot?' But back then everyone who'd been told would at least dare to slow their stride next time they passed the kiosk where *People Before Party* had been heaped in a pile, fruitlessly waiting for customers. I expect that, to some, it barely seemed possible that the earnest, owl-eyed man someone had pointed out to them once in a teashop was even now rattling his way in chains towards some prison camp.

'Oh, he'll be back,' my grandmother would scoff on such occasions. 'The fighting kitten's not so easily drowned.'

And in her day, perhaps, most did come back, even if it was years later, and perhaps with a foot gone from frostbite that ran too deep, or one arm swinging uselessly, from being the worst person in the world to trade a journalist's pen for a prison axe. '*They* recognize *you* first,' she told me once. 'Always. There you are, hurrying down the street with your basket, and you sense something in a stranger going past.'

'What *sort* of something?'

Grandmother had no education ('Nor any brains,' my mother always said, 'if she can cling to all that mumbo-jumbo about God and his saints'). So all she could do was turn from her pots and show me: first,

a flicker across the face, then a questioning look; a moment of hesitation.

She picked up her story. 'You peer at the stranger more closely. "Can that be *Leonie*?" you ask yourself. "There's no longer a picking on her!" Or, "How could a bear like Boris come to look such a *splinter*?" You say their name. And when they see that you're not going to walk straight past, their tears well over, and they clasp you so tight you'd think it was you, not them, who'd been away so long up where the nights are white.'

'White nights?'

'In summer. So far north. And black as pitch all winter. Oh, a terrible place to count out seven years with the blows of a pick, then come back to find your family scattered and your life's work gone.'

'Lucky to come back at all,' my mother muttered. She didn't think I heard. But it made no difference in the end because, slopping food from the pot to the dishes, Grandmother emptied enough of the sludge of her spirits on us all to last the whole meal through:

'In this benighted country, you can call no man lucky till he's dead.'