

**The Raven's Children
(Tales of Leningrad, #1)**

Yulia Yakovleva

Translated from the Russian by Maria Kozlovskaya Wiltshire

To my grandfather Boris and his sisters Katia, Tamara, Lida.

Chapter 1

Shura carefully jiggled the objects around to form a neat line on the rail of the train track: a nail, a copper coin, a screw and another nail. He looked up.

Valya waved to him from a little way off.

There was an odour of smoke and coal. Even the grey spring clouds, hanging low above the city, looked like they had come from the belly of a steam train. The outlines of railway sheds and huts merged in the darkness. Signals flashed. From time to time the silence was broken by the wail of a train and the clunking of shunting carriages. The ground was criss-crossed by rails. The black, oily sleepers, like piano keys, disappeared into the distance. Trains rolled past, slowing down to approach the platform or beginning to gain speed again.

Shura loved Leningrad – it was a beautiful city – but most of all he loved the train station, with its own secret world, hidden from everyone else.

To start with, the tracks ran very close together, like a river of metal. Further along, they split into separate lines. And then, somewhere far away, in the distance, where you couldn't see, they forked and thrust their separate ways over the vast Soviet expanse: to Moscow, Kiev, Stalingrad, Molotov, Tashkent, Kirov, Vladivostok, the Urals, Siberia, towards the mountains and the seas. Every time Shura stood on the railway tracks, he could feel them buzzing, as if the rails were part of the nervous system of a huge organism, and with the soles of his feet he could feel the lives of far-off towns.

He never told Valya, his best friend, about this feeling: Valya would have laughed. He was a down-to-earth boy. He had five younger brothers and sisters, and they all shared a tiny room in a flat on Marat Street. Valya had no time for this kind of daydreaming.

'Are you asleep or something? I've been shouting and waving. What's going on?' Valya asked as he arrived. He put his dirty, worn boot on the rail, looked over Shura's collection and said with an important air, 'This won't do.' He spread the objects wider apart. 'Otherwise there'll be one big flat pancake made of screws,' he explained.

Valya put his own collection on the other rail: several bolts and screws, a little tin bullet, some nails.

Jumping over the rails, the boys scuttled to the embankment and over the squelching snow to their hiding place in the bushes. There they crouched and talked, waiting for the first passing train to turn their metal offerings into warm and unbelievably thin, flat circles.

'Shh,' hissed Valya suddenly.

The station guard, who wore an old, greasy sheepskin, would sometimes make rounds over the tracks. He would stop from time to time and jab the ground with his iron bar, and then carry on walking.

But this time it wasn't the guard: it was a policeman with a dog. The dog pulled on the lead and excitedly wagged its bushy tail.

'An Alsatian,' Valya said knowledgeably. 'A guard dog.'

They moved further into the bush and froze. Shura watched the print his boot had left in the snow filling with grey water. The bushes were bare and didn't hide much. But either the dog wasn't expecting to come across two boys, or maybe he just didn't want to mess with some silly kids, but he went straight past them: he was obviously busy with more important stuff.

'I wonder who they're looking for.'

'A pickpocket?'

'Who knows,' Valya said. 'Perhaps he's trying to sniff out a saboteur who's planning a train crash.'

They watched quietly.

There was a whistle and a clanking. The signal changed from red to green. The heavy rumble of the train wheels started to fill the damp, thick air.

'It's a freight train,' said Valya.

They would both have preferred a passenger train. Those light-filled trains with their big windows weren't as heavy as the freight trains, and it was always so much fun to see how a wheel would squash a nail into a mushroom and a nut into a hexagon.

Huffing and puffing, with its rods and pistons moving like a runner's elbows, a dark green steam train slowly rolled past the boys. It was pulling a line of brown, windowless cattle vans with padlocked doors and cracks in between the boards to let the air in.

'Wow!' Shura nearly shouted. He thought he'd seen a pair of eyes through a crack. 'Did you see?'

'See what?'

'Somebody looked through the cracks!'

'So what? Could be a cow. Or a horse.' But Valya didn't sound too sure.

Another wagon. More cracks. More pairs of eyes.

'Wow! D'you see now?'

'Stop it. I do. So what?'

They both felt uneasy. The eyes were definitely human.

Another wagon. More eyes. Another one. Eyes again. With a noisy rattle, the train kept pulling along the massive, wooden wagons. Eyes. Eyes. Eyes, everywhere.

Suddenly a tiny object shot out from between the cracks. A white, pea-sized ball bounced off the sandy bank and rolled across the snow. It fell into a footprint and started to soak up water.

'Where are you going?' Shura hissed at Valya, as he jumped out from their hiding place, grabbed the tiny ball and quickly came back.

'Show me!' Shura demanded.

'I found it! It's mine, so hands off!' Valya warned.

'OK, OK!'

The train thundered by. They unwrapped and smoothed out the ball - it was a piece of paper. A letter. Where the paper was wet, it was smudged.

'Come on then, read it!' said Valya impatiently.

'So this is *a*. And this is *v*. And this one's *mm*'.

'*Mmm!*' Valya mocked. 'I thought you could read.'

'I've only just started school!' protested Shura.

Valya nudged him and pointed towards the disappearing train. The lights - two red eyes - blinked at them, as if saying goodbye. Valya put the paper ball inside his cap, and pulled it hard on to his head.

They jumped out from behind the bush and dashed towards the rails to collect their treasures. The wet snow squelched under their boots.

'Oh, damn.' Valya gestured at the rail in disappointment.

Shura scraped the rail with his fingernail. It was still hot. All their tiny objects had been flattened and welded into the rail by the wheels, turned into colourful spots: copper, tin, lead-coloured.

'That was a train and a half!'

'I've never seen a longer train.'

'So, who were those people?'

'Passengers, of course, who else?'

'Didn't look like a passenger train.'

'What if they were soldiers? Maybe they're on a secret mission. That's why they can only peer through the cracks, so people can't see their faces.'

Shura remembered the huge locks on the wagon doors.

'What if they're criminals?'

'There can't be that many criminals in the Soviet Union,' Valya said confidently. 'This isn't America, you know.'

'How d'you know?'

'Read it in a paper.'

'But you can't read!'

'Shame about my coin,' Valya said, changing the subject. 'Told you we should have bought some fizzy water instead.'

But he didn't sound too upset. He wasn't the type to regret losing a small coin.

Tripping over the crumbly snow, jumping over the bumps and going round piles of debris, they came through the backyards to Ligovsky Prospekt.

The city buzzed, its straight wide avenues lined by tight rows of shabby city buildings, grey with age. It wasn't properly snowing – more like sleet, sprinkling on the hurrying passers-by. They rushed in all directions. Cars hooted angrily, and tram bells rang.

The boys turned into a side street where the dirty, wet snow came up to their knees. The buildings in this place were covered in damp spots. Valya's house, on Marat Street, was a stone's throw from here. But Shura had to walk five more blocks, past the market, to Pravda Street.

It was time to part company. Shura would get into trouble if he was caught hanging around with Valya. Even though his parents were at work, he didn't want to be spotted by his neighbours.

'Do you want to swap it for a nail?' Shura suddenly offered.

'What?' Valya said, uncomprehending.

Shura couldn't stop thinking about the mysterious letter. Who threw it? Why? Who was it for?

'You mean the paper?' said Valya.

'What if it's a map? Maybe it's buried treasure?' Shura suggested.

'You wish! It's just a piece of paper.'

But, judging by Valya's expression, Shura had planted a seed of doubt in him.

'So throw it away then. Why not? If it's just a piece of paper.'

They crossed Marat Street. But Valya didn't notice. He was wrapped up in his own thoughts.

'Do you want a cartridge for it?' offered Shura.

A bullet cartridge was a valuable possession. Valya thought for a second.

Shura didn't need that piece of paper, he was just nosy. He was interested in everything, he always wanted to be in the know, to sniff out, to test.

Valya didn't need it either. But, looking at Shura's glistening eyes, he changed his mind. If the piece of paper was worth a bullet cartridge, then he definitely needed it himself.

'Push off.'

'Are you my friend or what?' Shura wasn't giving up.

'I found it.'

'We both found it!'

'You hid in the bushes!'

They were passing the market now. It was a low building, with cracks and peeling paint. Women were pacing the porch, milk bottles poking out of their baskets. Outside, a man in large mittens was taking boxes out of a cart and placing them on the ground.

'We were both hiding!' Shura protested.

'I picked it up!'

'I would have picked it up too!'

'Why didn't you? You chickened out!'

'I chickened out?' Shura lightly pushed Valya. Valya staggered but didn't fall, and pushed Shura back, and then once more. Valya ran. Shura chased him.

They ran until they reached Shura's house. Shura caught up with Valya and slapped him on the head. Valya's cap fell off. The paper ball fell out. While Valya was desperately trying to grab his cap, Shura, giving out a victorious shriek, seized the piece of paper in his fist.

'Give it back, you rat! I found it!' Valya yelled.

He jumped, trying to snatch the paper from Shura's hand. No chance!

'No!'

'So is that the kind of person you are?' Valya suddenly let go of Shura. 'You're not a friend to me any more, then!'

'Good riddance!' Shura pushed him away.

Valya spat in his direction.

'Don't even think about going to see Papanin with me tomorrow!'

Leningrad was preparing to greet the survivors of an expedition led by the famous Papanin. The polar explorer, together with his team, had drifted on a melting ice float for many days. Their lives were in danger, and the whole country tirelessly listened to the news and read the updates in the papers every day. But the Soviet ice-breakers and planes came just in time and rescued them. And now the heroes were coming back home. They were supposed to be driven through the whole city, all the way from the port, in open-top cars with flags, an orchestra and escorts.

For a second, Shura wanted to dump the silly piece of paper on the pavement. But instead he shouted back, 'Like I need you, to go there! I can go by myself!'

Valya shook his fist at him, keeping his distance. 'Just you wait. If I see you tomorrow ... you'll catch it.'

'Oh yeah, I'm really frightened,' Shura mocked in reply and poked his tongue out.

'Oh, so it's like that? I'll show you!' Valya picked up a large piece of brick, and threw it towards Shura with all his might.

'Are you going to pay for the new window?' shouted Aunt Doussya, Shura's neighbour. Shura was mortified.

Not much later, Shura's father and Aunt Doussya stood opposite each other like two boxers on a ring.

Aunt Doussya lived on the ground floor. Shura had never been in her apartment before. She was a large woman, with large red hands. Her room, though, was very small, smoky and dark. The cardboard that now covered the broken window pane was making it darker.

'Shura, who broke the window?' Father asked.

'It's clear as day who did it!' shrieked Aunt Doussya. 'It's the delinquent one!'

Father winced. 'Hang on. You mean it wasn't my son? Right?'

'It's not my fault', Shura grumbled.

'Oh yes, it is your fault. Definitely your fault!' Aunt Doussya angrily shook her fist in the air. 'You brought him here, that delinquent one! That gangster! And now you stand here like it's nothing to do with you, hands in your pockets!'

'Valya is not lelink... ledink..'

'Shura, stop clowning around,' Father said. 'And take your hands out of your pockets.'

Shura sighed and pulled his hands out.

'So you played with Valya again?' A crease formed in the middle of Father's forehead.

Shura sighed again.

'He did! He did! I saw them!' Aunt Doussya screamed. 'I'll never see any money from that delinquent! That gangster! They're as poor as church mice! His mother works at a factory, kids coming out of her ears! Roaming the streets, getting up to no good, breaking windows!'

'He didn't throw it at the window! He threw it at me!' Shura tried to defend Valya.

Aunt Doussya rolled her eyes and sighed.

'Listen, there's no need to shout,' Father said calmly. Aunt Doussya was purple with anger. Father pulled his wallet out of his pocket. 'How much is the window?'

'So that's your weekend ice cream gone, as I'm sure you understand,' said Father when they came up to their flat. 'And I'm afraid the cinema tickets are gone, too, for the whole month. And for that woman, of all people! Could you not break some nice person's window?'

'Ilya!' Mother said to Father in a warning tone.

'Be thankful she didn't eat us alive,' Father said to Shura.

Shura opened his mouth to say something in protest.

‘Shura, not another word,’ Mother said. ‘You’re in enough trouble already.’
 She was putting away freshly ironed bedding. Little Bobby wanted to help, which meant he was under her feet the whole time. He was only three.
 ‘Aren’t windows expensive these days?’ Father said to Mother. ‘Can you imagine...’
 He suddenly bent down and picked something up. ‘What is this?’
 Shura had a sinking feeling. He felt in his pocket: the paper was gone!
 Father read it silently. He bit his lip. He glanced at the door, looking panicked, then at Mother. Mother came to him and read it, too.
 ‘Please tell... *being taken to Kolyma... number five Sadovaya Street...* Who is it from?’
 Both parents were staring at Shura.
 ‘Answer us, you monster,’ Mother said, her face white. ‘Who gave it to you?!’
 ‘Nobody.’
 ‘Don’t lie! Do you hear? Tell the truth!’
 Bobby’s face twitched from Mother’s shouting; he was about to start crying. Mother picked him up.
 ‘Look what you’ve done!’ she shouted at Shura.
 ‘I’m not lying! I found it!’
 ‘Where did you find it? Where?’ Father sounded serious.
 Shura was silent.
 He was strictly forbidden to go to the train station, let alone anywhere near the rail tracks. Let alone with Valya!
 ‘He’s going to drive me to the grave,’ Mother said in whisper, sitting down on the chair.
 ‘You see, Shura, a bad person wrote this. A criminal. A criminal who was punished by our Soviet country,’ said Father.
 Shura felt as if his heart was being squeezed.
 ‘Who did you show it to? Did you show it to Tanya?’
 Shura shook his head. Tanya was his elder sister. She wasn’t back from school yet.
 ‘Tanya’s still at school,’ Mother confirmed. She was very pale.
 ‘So,’ Father said, ‘I hope you’re not lying. I’m going to put this paper in the bin. As if it never existed. Do you understand? Whatever we said here, don’t ever say it anywhere else. You understand?’
 Shura nodded, biting his lip.
 ‘Otherwise there could be big trouble.’
 Shura started crying. Bobby, sitting on Mother’s lap, looked at him and started crying too.
 ‘No, he positively wants to drive me to the grave!’ Mother exclaimed.
 ‘Shura,’ Father said, trying to sound as calm as possible, ‘I’m not angry. You didn’t know. And this ... bad person, this criminal, he threw it out on purpose, to get the person who finds it into trouble. Do you understand?’
 Shura nodded, and wiped his face with the back of his hand.
 ‘Is that why they were carried in big locked wagons?’
 ‘Which wagons?’ Then Mother suddenly realised. ‘Were you playing on the tracks again?’
 Shura sniffled. His shoulders started shaking.
 ‘Shura,’ Father said, stroking his head. ‘There is no place for these criminals in Leningrad, among good people. That’s why they were carried in locked wagons. Do you see? But that is not the point right now. Nobody is telling you off for going to the station.’
 ‘Yes, we are telling him off!’ Mother objected.
 ‘If anyone finds out, it’ll be very difficult for us to prove that you found this piece of paper by mistake,’ Father continued in a serious voice. ‘Do you understand? So keep your mouth shut.’

Shura nodded, sniffing. Father hugged him and stroked his back. Then he came up to the desk and found a cigarette lighter in one of the drawers. He lit the paper and threw it into an ashtray.

'And now it's nothing to worry about,' he said optimistically.

They watched the flame licking the paper from every side.

The door lock clicked. Father shuddered. Mother jumped up off her chair.

It was Tanya, coming back from school.

'You scared us,' Mother said.

Tanya dumped her school bag.

'What's the burning smell?'

'It's—' Shura started.

'Father's been burning some old papers,' Mother said quickly.

'Ah,' Tanya said indifferently. The, as if she'd switched to another channel straight away, one where a lot more was going on, she said excitedly, 'Guess what happened at school today! So. Imagine: it's break-time. Me and some other girls are sitting on a window sill—'

'Shura,' father interrupted, 'we haven't finished. I mean the train station. No playing outside for a month. Especially with Valya. And tomorrow after school – no going to Nevsky, either, no Papanin. Home, straight away!'

'Is he grounded? What for?' Tanya's face lit up.

Shura made a face.

'Tanya, come and have some dinner,' Mother said. 'Just wash your hands first.'

'Shura, did you understand what I said?' his father said seriously.

'I did,' Shura grumbled.

Tanya kept babbling. 'So what did he do this time? Hung out with that mate of his again? I knew it! So, guess what happened today. So, we're sitting on...'

Chapter 2

Shura scampered out of the door. The door slammed behind him, and the cardboard on Doussya's window seemed to glower at him reproachfully. But Shura was over yesterday's troubles. It was a new, happy day and it smelt of spring.

He ran across Fontanka to Nevsky Prospekt. Papanin and his expedition team were expected to drive past here in their cars. The buildings seemed especially tall and straight, with all the medals and epaulets of their plasterwork at the top, as if they stood to attention.

The whole city was excitedly waiting for the heroes to turn up. The March sun tapped out its tune on window sills and porch roofs: *drip-drop, drip-drop, drip-drop*. The golden splodges of sunlight embellished the buildings and sparkled in numberless canals and puddles, mostly murky yellow. Street-cleaners had swept the muddy snow to the edges of the pavements, and the sun was picking out glimmering 'diamonds' in the grey mountains as crystals of snow flashed here and there. Even the seagulls flying over the wide Neva were perfectly white, looking like crisp, clean serviettes.

Shura was tearing down the street, barely touching the ground. Splashes were flying from under his feet. But the passers-by that he was overtaking weren't cross with him; they were smiling.

Everyone knew what kind of day it was, and why all the girls and boys were rushing. Shura ran past the ballet school, where the white columns lined up at the front like graceful ballerinas. 'Watch it!' said a woman with a shopping bag, who only just managed to jump out of his way.

Shura ran around the huge yellow theatre. On top of the roof was Apollo, wearing a very short skirt and driving four plaster horses. Apollo could see everything from the top, Shura thought with envy.

In the small park in front of the theatre, the bare black trees looked cold, their feet soaking in freezing water. They were trembling, either from the wind or from impatience. The tall, cast-iron empress on her pedestal was stretching her neck, as if trying to see whether the famous polar explorers were coming.

The crowd of onlookers was buzzing on both sides of the road. Occasionally somebody dashed across the road, and a policeman in a shining helmet blew his whistle warningly. The whistle didn't scare anyone, but rather added to the general excited impatience.

Shura joyfully dived into the crowd, pushing people away with his elbows.

Everyone stood very close together, as if in a tram on the way to work. People are normally sleepy and grumpy on a tram, but here they were happy to be close together: it seemed like the joy of this day was spreading from person to person. It seemed the snow was melting from the happiness these people were radiating. Even the wet, black ravens weren't shouting their usual 'crah, crah' – it sounded more like 'hurrah! hurrah!'

'They're coming! They're coming!' voices suddenly chorused. A wave of exultation moved through the crowd. An orchestra was playing a march somewhere far ahead. Something rattled.

Shura laughed with joy like everyone else. It was a shame Valya wasn't there – it would be much better to laugh together. But what was there to be done? They'd surely make up somehow.

'Look, look!' somebody said.

Shura lifted his head, too. Three planes with crimson red stars on their wings flew very low above Nevsky Prospekt, showing their grey bellies. A trail of white paper notes was swarming behind them. People were jumping up and grabbing them out of the air. The paper notes said 'Welcome home to the heroes!'

Shura tried to grab one too, but couldn't reach. *Here's one, finally!* He managed to snatch it from right in front of some lady's nose.

He shoved it inside his jacket. It'd be great to get another one, for Valya. And one for his sister Tanya. And one more, for little Bobby. And two for Mother and Father.

'Hoorah!' Shura shouted, mad with joy. 'Hoorah!'

Shura got carried away and grabbed at another note, not realising that somebody else had grabbed the same note from the other end.

'Let go, or I'll clout you,' a tall boy in a cap hissed at Shura. Before Shura had time to react, the boy elbowed him and a white spark flashed in between his eyes, followed by sharp pain. Something warm leaked from out of his nose.

Suddenly the crowd shuddered. The waves of excitement increased. The whole street shouted 'Hoorah! Hoorah!' Open-top limousines appeared at the top of the road, by the golden spire of the Admiralty building. The limousines proudly carried the polar heroes.

Squashed in the crowd, Shura could only see other people's backs and legs. Tears were streaking down his cheeks. Blood was dripping on to his chin and chest.

'Hey, are you OK?' he suddenly heard a voice say. A man in a raincoat and hat cleared a space for Shura. 'Excuse me, are you all out of your minds?' he said sternly. 'Look what you've done to the child! You've nearly trampled the boy to death.' The people made a little room, but didn't really pay attention to Shura. They were busy shouting 'Hoorah!', standing on their tiptoes and waving their hats, scarves and newspapers. The man in the hat pushed his way through the crowd with his elbows, protecting Shura, and managed to pull him out into the open.

'Just look at you,' he muttered, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket.

Shura's coat was stained with blood.

'Lift your head,' he told Shura.

The stranger scooped some snow from the top of an iron bollard nearby, which he wrapped in his handkerchief and pressed against Shura's nose. While Shura stood with his head tilted back, he saw a huge billboard floating in the air, with a face and a moustache on it. Somewhere under the billboard, the famous polar explorer Papanin and his crew were going by in a limousine. The exhilarated crowd followed them.

The yellow writing on the billboard said, 'The leader and hero of all our victories is our beloved Comrade Stalin!'

'I think you've stopped bleeding now,' said the man in the hat, gazing after the billboard. 'How did you manage that, comrade?'

Shura was devastated. He'd missed everything!

'I'll give you your hanky back,' he muttered. 'Mother will wash it, and I'll give it back. Just give me your address, where I can send it.'

'You dummy,' said the man kindly. 'Give you my address? Dream on!'

He dropped the bloodied ball of handkerchief into the bin.

Shura looked at the man: he wasn't laughing at him. He looked like Tanya's music teacher, only not as old.

'You know what, I'm desperate for some ice cream. Since we missed the explorers, let's at least have some ice cream in their honour,' said the man casually. 'Do you want some ice cream?'

'No', Shura said. And then added, 'You're joking, right?'

'Me? I never joke.'

'Well, you bet I want ice cream!'

They went over to the nearest crossroads. There was a shop on the corner which resembled a huge, yellow-white flatiron. It had been there since the tsar reigned, when Leningrad was called St Petersburg, and merchants had their stalls there. The merchants were now gone. Instead, there was a big shop, like a supermarket. It had a walkway along its perimeter, with white semi-arches. There, under the vaults of the walkway, with his large blue box on four bicycle wheels, stood an ice-cream man.

Shura and the man in a hat came up to him. The ice-cream man, despite the spring, wore a fur hat, and his white robe was draped over a quilted jacket. It was as if for him it was always winter, because of the type of goods he was selling.

'Two Eskimos, please,' said the man in the hat.

'In honour of Comrade Papanin!' Shura exclaimed.

'Well, if it's in Comrade Papanin's honour, then it's my treat.' The ice-cream seller smiled, but took money from the man in the hat anyway. He lifted the lid, disappearing for a

second in a cloud of icy steam which burst from the box. When he reappeared, he handed Shura a marvellous thick cold stick in a silver wrap.

'Let's go and sit down, it's not good for your health to eat while walking,' the man in the hat said, quickly unwrapping the ice cream.

They entered a small park by the theatre and sat on a bench. The cast-iron statue of the empress proudly held her sceptre and chin, taking absolutely no notice of the big drip at the end of her nose and the pigeon on her head. She looked utterly ridiculous. Shura laughed.

The man in the hat gave him a questioning look. But Shura only waved his hand to say, *never mind, too long to explain!* The pigeon had flown off, anyway.

'So, does your nose still hurt?' the man in the hat asked.

Shura's nose did hurt when he opened his mouth to bite the ice cream, but he shook his head enthusiastically. What a strange man, really! How can anything hurt when you eat ice cream? And not just any ice cream, but Eskimo!

'It's nothing, really!' Shura said. 'I didn't need looking after, if I'm honest. I could kick his ass, too. Just didn't want to waste my time...'

He was eating his ice cream quickly, and his mouth felt numb from the cold.

The man in the hat laughed.

'Of course you could! It's just that my parents taught me to take the side of the victim, and I thought you needed help,' he explained.

He ate his Eskimo as if it wasn't ice cream but cabbage soup or lumpy porridge. As if he had to force it down. Shura thought the ice cream didn't deserve to be eaten like that. He smoothed out his wrapper, folded it and put it in his pocket.

'Did you know that Eskimo was invented in honour of the Soviet polar explorers?' he said to the man. 'None of my friends have tried it yet.'

The man in the hat looked towards Nevsky Prospekt. The explorers had already gone. The orchestra had put their trumpets away. The traffic had resumed: the cars roared, the tram bells rang. It looked like the heroes had driven past very quickly, and the crowd didn't want to leave yet.

'Just look at them,' the man in the hat suddenly said, pointing at the spreading crowd. 'Do they really need this Arctic lark? The North Pole...?' And then he carried on, 'Not a single plump face in the crowd. What have they got to be proud of? An ice-breaker, for goodness' sake? When their coats are in tatters and they haven't had a square meal in weeks?' The man in the hat shook his head in disappointment. The ice cream was melting in his hand.

Shura, who had already finished his ice cream, thought, *This man is bonkers!*

'Just look at them,' insisted the man.

Shura didn't want to seem rude so he did as the man asked. When he did look at the people around him, he noticed that the faces, although overjoyed, were indeed long, tired and pale. And their clothes were drab and old.

The man in the hat livened up and continued, 'Did they ask this explorer, when they took him off the ice-block, if he wanted to be rescued? What if he wanted to stay on it? What if he climbed it on purpose, to drift away from it all? Maybe he wanted to land in some lovely little country, where people drink hot chocolate in winter and ladies wear beautiful muffs.'

Shura gazed at him in disbelief.

The man in the hat laughed. 'I'm joking. It's a story about the Snow Queen. Do you want my ice cream? Here. Come on, take it!' He got up. 'Take it! I have to go. OK then, bye!' He lightly touched his hat with the tips of his fingers, nodded, and started walking towards the theatre.

Shura looked at the ice cream in his hand in total amazement. But the ice cream couldn't wait. Shura bit into the white, chocolate-covered treat so hard that his teeth hurt.

'A-haaa!' somebody's voice suddenly said behind him. 'Hanging around Nevsky, having a good time, are we? Perfect. You'll be reported.' And Tanya narrowed her eyes like she always did.

She was only two years older than Shura, nine years old. But sometimes she behaved as if she was nineteen. Or even ninety. Sometimes she was an ordinary sister you could play and chat with. But sometimes – as if suddenly remembering – she would become the Elder Sister: mean and a bit alien.

‘Stop pretending to be a parent,’ Shura said, trying to hide the shock that Tanya had given him. Hearing her voice sent shivers down his spine. Father would never tell him off or shout at him. Nor did he ever lay a finger on him, like Valya’s mother would – she beat Valya. She was a thin, permanently tired and wound-up woman in an old cardigan, and she would grab him and whip him with a leather belt on various parts of his body – his back, his legs, his bottom. Shura’s mother would simply hold her head in her hands and wince in despair. Father would just stare at him and say, ‘How could this happen, Shura?’ But that was worse than any beating.

‘So, you’re hanging out with Valya. In town. Well done!’ Tanya carried on.

‘There’s no Valya. And I’m here on business,’ Shura retorted.

‘Are you?’

‘I am.’

She had a little pear-shaped case in her hand, her violin case. She was coming back from her music lesson. Her music teacher lived nearby, on Sadovaya Street. Shura cursed himself silently. How could he forget she would be coming home at this hour? And that she would see him here, in the park!

‘Tanya, I wasn’t having a good time on Nevsky. I was greeting Papanin’s explorers. You wouldn’t understand.’

‘No, I obviously wouldn’t!’

‘You’re just jealous.’ Shura carefully licked the ice cream. Tanya kept watching his every move. She didn’t need to be told that Eskimo was a completely new type of ice cream, amazingly expensive, and none of their friends on their street had tried it yet.

He threw the stick in the bin.

Tanya’s eyes narrowed again. ‘I’m so telling on you to Mother and Father.’

‘Go on then, I don’t care.’

‘I’m also telling that you stole the money to buy ice cream.’

‘I stole money?’ Shura blushed so hard his face became hot. He didn’t expect this kind of accusation.

‘And who punched you in the nose?’

Shura remembered how he had got into that fight to get a flyer for Tanya, and felt so hurt he nearly cried.

‘Ha, got nothing to say, do you! Because you stole it!’ Tanya’s voice was ringing in his ears. ‘It’s that Valya of yours, he must have taught you. Told you!’

‘No!’

‘Yes!’

‘Somebody treated me to some ice cream, I’ll have you know.’

‘Who – Papanin?’ Tanya asked mockingly.

‘Don’t be stupid! It was a man.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m not. He had a hat on.’

‘Which man in a hat? Does he have a name?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never met him before.’

‘A total stranger treated you to some ice cream? Well, that’s interesting! Look, everybody! A stranger bought him ice cream!’

‘He did! He even gave me his portion!’

Tanya’s eyes suddenly widened. From narrow slits, they turned into large saucers.

‘Did you eat them both?’

‘Imagine – I did!’ Shura looked at her defiantly. What would she have to say now?

‘Shura!’

Shura stood, his arms crossed, a haughty expression on his face. Tanya looked as if she’d been struck by lightning, her mouth hanging open. *Serves her right*, Shura thought.

‘Shura... You...’
 ‘Ate both of them,’ he repeated proudly.
 Tanya’s case dropped to the ground with a thud.
 ‘Shura!’ She was serious. ‘He must have been... a spy! An infiltrator,’ whispered Tanya.

‘This is rubbish!’ exclaimed Shura, but inside he was terrified. The stranger was indeed bizarre.
 Shura picked up the violin case, brushed off the wet snow and put it on the bench. Let Tanya see that he’s a caring person. Unlike herself.
 ‘What did he tell you?’ Tanya sat down next to him. She was worried. It was clear she wasn’t putting an act on. Shura’s confidence vanished.
 ‘He said... that... that Papanin climbed the ice-block on purpose, to leave the Soviet Union.’

Tanya gasped. ‘Do you see, now?’
 Shura was stunned. It all made sense now. An ordinary Soviet man wouldn’t say anything like that. Wasn’t Tanya clever? He realised how silly he was. Teachers warned about this at school. The newspapers wrote about it. The radio constantly reminded about it. Parents talked about it at home. Someone was arrested at his father’s office because he was an infiltrator, a spy. An Enemy of the People. And he, Shura, had just let one escape.
 He looked at his sister, frightened. ‘Shall we tell everything to a policeman right now? The ice-cream man will confirm, he saw him! He can describe him.’
 Tanya grabbed Shura by the shoulders. ‘Shura,’ she whispered. ‘The ice cream... Did you definitely see him buy it?’
 ‘Yes. I think so.’
 ‘What if he replaced it at the last moment?’
 ‘Shut up. Why would he?’
 ‘To poison you, of course!’ Tanya grabbed his hands. ‘Are you OK? How’s your stomach? Does it hurt?’
 ‘No. Yes. I think so,’ Shura mumbled, his stomach churning.
 ‘We should call an ambulance, now! Let’s go.’ Tanya jumped up and grabbed her violin case.
 ‘No!’ Shura protested. He stayed sitting on the bench.
 ‘What?’
 ‘I don’t need an ambulance. Or a policeman.’
 ‘Why not?’
 ‘Just think about it. I was the one who let the spy go. It’s my fault. I’ll be arrested, not helped.’

Tanya stopped for a second. ‘You’re right,’ she said slowly. ‘At the moment, only you and I know about it.’
 ‘And the ice-cream man,’ Shura added gloomily.
 ‘He doesn’t count.’ Tanya waved her hand dismissively. ‘He probably thought it was your father.’
 ‘Tanya... am I going to die?’
 ‘Let’s run home. I know what to do!’
 Shura looked at his sister with hope. He didn’t quite believe that he, Shura, could just die like that. But he had an uneasy feeling.
 Tanya grabbed his hand. ‘Can you walk?’
 Shura nodded.
 On the way home, Tanya explained, ‘Do you remember, when I was queasy, Mother gave me warm water with some pink medicine in it, and I had to be sick until it all came out?’
 Shura’s legs seemed to give way beneath him.
 Tanya dragged him along. They managed to make it to Fontanka Street, then took a shortcut through the backyards and came out on to Pravda Street.
 They went up the stairs, and Tanya opened the door with a key she wore on a piece of ribbon around her neck. Mother and Father were at work and Bobby was at nursery.

They tiptoed down the corridor. The large communal flat they lived in had twelve rooms for eleven families – one room each except for Shura’s family, who occupied two rooms. Everyone shared the kitchen, where there were eleven tables along the walls. The corridor was also shared, and so were the bathroom and toilet.

Fortunately, everyone was out at this time of the day – at work, at college or shopping. It was almost dark in the corridor. The closed doors stared blankly. But from behind one door you could hear the faint sound of music from a gramophone. An old woman lived there; she was retired and lived on a state pension.

The rooms belonging to Shura’s family were right at the end of the corridor. Tanya unlocked the door with her key and they walked into their parents’ room. They called it their parents’ room because their parents slept here during the night, but during the day this room was used as a lounge, where the whole family gathered. A large, round table stood in the middle. It was used for eating, writing, everything. Their parents’ bed was separated from the rest of the room by a folding basket-work screen. A wardrobe was built into the wall.

Tanya opened the wardrobe door and walked in. Shura followed her.

A long time ago, Father decided to join the two rooms together, so that they didn’t have to come in through the corridor. He cut out an entrance in the wall between the rooms, and because they couldn’t find a door that would fit, he placed the wardrobe in the hole. The children walked from one room to the other through dresses and suits.

Since then, the actual door to the children’s room was always locked, and the key to it had been long lost. Everyone forgot there even was a door.

Tanya and Shura loved this secret passage in between their rooms, through the wardrobe. Only little Bobby, who didn’t know much about life yet, thought that this was normal, that everyone had a wardrobe in between their rooms.

Shura slipped into the bedroom. A silky sleeve brushed his face, as if stroking him. This made Shura feel even guiltier.

Tanya helped Shura take his clothes off, pulled off his boots and put him into bed.

The door creaked and Tanya disappeared into the wardrobe. Shura heard the door to the corridor close.

Soon, Tanya came back with a jug of warm water. Then she climbed on to a stool and found a little bottle in the top cupboard, which the children were strictly forbidden from opening. She pulled out a little rubber cap. Then she carefully shook several purple crumbs into the jug, which immediately made the water bright pink.

Shura kept listening to what was happening inside his stomach.

‘Drink it,’ Tanya ordered, and brought her face close to Shura’s.

Close up, her eyes seemed huge. Shura could even see the brown dots around the pupils. To Shura they looked like freckles which had escaped from Tanya’s nose.

The water was disgusting and warm, and despite its dark pink colour, had no taste or smell.

‘Drink up!’

Shura obediently drank the liquid. It felt like he had a glass ball inside him.

Tanya rushed in with an empty pot. ‘You need to be sick into here now! Come on!’

‘I can’t!’

‘Dear God, what a silly child!’

‘How do I make myself sick?’

‘You need to stick your fingers deep into your throat and tickle your tongue right at the back,’ Tanya patiently explained.

Shura did as he was told, and tickled his throat with his fingers. The glass ball inside him moved, cracked and gushed out into the pot.

‘Well done,’ said Tanya, looking at the contents of the pot with satisfaction.

‘What’s in there?’ asked Shura worriedly.

‘You’re saved,’ Tanya said. She grabbed the pot and took it away.

Shura flopped back on to the pillow.

Tanya took the jug away. She washed out the pot in the kitchen and moved the stool away from the wardrobe door. No one would know anything had happened.

She came back and felt Shura's forehead – just in case – like Mother did it when somebody was unwell. She sat down next to him.

'You know that there was a spy at Father's work, who got arrested? Remember he told us? So they'll catch yours, too, don't you worry. There's no place for such vermin among Soviet people. Now get some sleep. I've got to go to school.'

'Don't go! Please!' Shura begged.

'I can't. Otherwise they'll suspect something's going on. Do you understand? You should act normal, like nothing happened. If Mother asks you, tell her you've got a sore throat. Let her think you've got a cold. Do you hear me?'

'I do.'

'Repeat what I said.'

'I heard you!'

Tanya buttoned up her coat, grabbed her school bag and left. The door lock clicked.

Shura lay in bed in total silence and listened to his body as hard as he could, in case the mysterious poison made itself known. He didn't notice how he fell asleep.

Maybe he really had caught a cold from swallowing large, freezing lumps of ice cream, because when Mother came into the room he struggled to open his eyes. Mother was surprised to see him in bed.

'What happened, darling?' she asked.

Mother took off her coat. Then she spoon-fed him some hot broth. Bobby stood silently by the foot of his bed, holding on to the edge, with his chin on his little chubby hands. Then Mother led him away, through the wardrobe door, into their parents' room.

Father came from work later. He sat down on the side of Shura's bed, felt his forehead with his soft and chilly hand and asked, 'Are you OK?'

Then he turned off the night light on the bed-side cabinet.

Tanya came back. She carefully poked him in the ribs.

Shura saw everything that happened – Mother, Father, Tanya – in a kind of haze, first twinkling with lights, then becoming darker. The room started spinning around him like a carousel. The man in the hat was being driven in an open-top limousine instead of Papanin. The crowd cheered, and on the big poster, next to Comrade Stalin, was a picture of the ice-cream man. The leader of the Soviet country singled Shura out in the crowd, frowned at him, and wagged his finger at him. Shura woke up.

It was dark. The pale moon, or maybe the street lamp, shed its light on his sleeping sister's face, her two straight plaits framing it.

'Tanya!' Shura whispered.

His sister didn't answer.

Well, let her sleep, then. He lay still and listened for his tummy rumbling. There was nothing. *Does it mean I've got away with it? Or, perhaps, it's too late now? What if I am not just lying in bed, but dying slowly?*

This thought sent shivers down his spine.

Thank God for Tanya, he thought, *she's got her wits about her.* Shura thought that he should leave her his pencils. And the brand-new drawing set, which his parents bought him in September, when he started school. He wanted to wake her up straight away to say goodbye.

'Tanya!' he called again. But his sister only frowned in her sleep, and the moonlight smoothed over her face again.

Well, sleep then, you fool, thought Shura angrily. *All your own fault,* he told himself. So many times they said at school and on the radio: be careful, a spy and an enemy could be close by.

Shura gave out a sigh. What a waste of seven years! He hadn't done anything, didn't even have a dog. And now – what a pointless end. And all because he had to try the new ice cream before everyone else. How silly!

If only he could have gone to Nevsky with Valya! If only Valya hadn't thrown a rock into Aunt Doussya's window... if only they hadn't argued over that stupid note...

Valya will certainly cry at my funeral, that's for sure. And so will Aunt Doussya. But it'll be too late. Shura's eyes started welling up.

Suddenly, there were muffled voices behind the wardrobe door: Mother's, Father's, somebody else's. The other voice was familiar – who was it? Bobby started crying. He was sleeping in their parents' room tonight, because Shura was unwell. The voices were getting louder.

Shura sniffled, and pricked up his ears as hard as he could. But a few moments later he was fast asleep.

He woke up – finally – to the sound of the dripping on the window sill, which was getting out of rhythm. The sun had painted a large bright square on the parquet floor and was quietly admiring its own work.

I'm alive! Shura sat up happily in his bed. *I got away with it!*

His sister's bed was empty. It was strange, though, that nobody had woken him up for school. They probably thought he was still unwell, Shura decided. *But I am alive, that's most important! And life is great! The breakfast is probably on the table by now, he thought, blinis or porridge. Or a fried egg.* The thought of a hot, delicious egg made Shura get out of bed and patter over to the wardrobe. *Won't they be surprised to see me,* he thought, imagining Mother, Father and Tanya sitting at the table.

He stepped through the thicket of dresses and suits and opened the wardrobe door.

Instead of breakfast, there was a large bowl on the table. A small orange flame was flickering in it, while Mother was ripping up some papers and feeding them to the flame one by one. Tanya was looking on, wide-eyed. Her face didn't show any expression; it looked like she was in a stupor.

Father wasn't there.

Bobby wasn't there, either.

Mother kept ripping the photographs. 'Tanya, won't you help?' she cried in despair, pushing the pile of papers towards her. Tanya obeyed. 'Put them in one by one, not all together!' Mother exclaimed, noticing that Tanya had shoved a whole sheet of paper into the bowl. The flame started licking it with its long tongue. 'Like we need all the neighbours to come running here because of the smell!'

'Mother,' Shura called, full of fear.

'Shura! You woke up!' Mother tried to make a happy face, but only managed to curl her lips. She started darting around the room. She took out a pair of large felt boots from the wardrobe, and an old blanket.

'How are you feeling?' Mother asked as she dashed past him with a pile of clothes in her arms.

Tanya glared at Shura.

'Fine,' Shura muttered. His face burned with shame for what had happened last night.

Luckily, Mother didn't notice any change in him. She was putting the clothes into an open suitcase. The warm knitted socks and a thick woollen jacket, which she always said was long due to be thrown away, were all packed into the suitcase, too.

'Where's Bobby?' asked Shura.

Mother didn't answer. She was staring blankly at the suitcase, which stood in front of her with its big mouth open.

'He's at nursery,' Tanya answered instead. 'Where else can he be?'

'Mother, am I not going to school today?' asked Shura.

'What?' Mother said, as if waking up. 'Of course you will! If you're well,' she said warmly.

'I—'

But Mother didn't let him finish. Her thoughts were somewhere else.

'Of course. Definitely. Just have some bread and milk. I haven't cooked anything. Look in the cupboard.'

'The old woman will tell me off for being late.'

'Don't say that, she's your teacher. And she won't tell you off, because I'll write a note. Is that OK?'

Shura nodded. 'Where's Father?'

'He's away,' Mother said quickly. 'He's gone away. Not for long. He had to go on business urgently. They sent a telegram and he had to go. But he'll be back soon. They'll sort things out and he'll be back.'

Mother continued to dash from the wardrobe to the suitcase and back. Tanya watched her in silent astonishment.

'A special one?' asked Shura.

'What?' said Mother.

'Is it a special business trip?'

'It is,' Mother said with a sigh.

'Where's he gone?' Shura asked. *Wow, that's amazing!* he thought. *Father is away on business! Maybe even to the Urals or Siberia, to work on a very important, strategic construction project.*

'Where did father go?' he asked again.

'Will you please stop asking?' Mother suddenly shouted. *'Where did he go! Where did he go!* First your sister! Now you! What do you want from me? Will you just leave me alone?'

She stopped, dropped the hat she was holding and burst into tears.

'Mama!' Tanya ran up and put her arms around her.

Shura started crying, too. Mother knelt down next to him and hugged him.

'Oh, come on now,' she muttered, stroking Shura's back with one hand and Tanya's arm with the other. 'Aren't we silly, don't you think? Standing here crying, all three of us. It's a good thing Bobby's not here, otherwise he would be properly scared. Father will be back soon, don't worry, OK? All good?'

Mother got up and wiped her face with the back of her hand. 'Come on, Shura, wash your face and run to school. You're so late, it'll be embarrassing.'

Several minutes later, holding a slice of bread in one hand and throwing his bag on to his shoulder with the other, Shura was all dressed and heading out into the corridor.

Their neighbour, Rita, gave him a strange look. She had rollers all over her head.

'Good morning!' Shura shouted happily.

But she didn't answer.

'My father's gone away on business! He was called urgently!' he announced proudly. He wanted to tell everyone!

The neighbour looked shocked, and her mouth dropped open.

Well, of course she's surprised, Shura thought. Another neighbour, the old woman who lived on the state pension, came out into the corridor. Nobody was friends with her so she was rarely seen.

'Good morning, Shura,' she mumbled, trotting past.

'Good morning!' Shura blurted out as loudly as he could.

'You might want to stay away from certain children!' Rita shouted to her. 'Sometimes, you never know...' She didn't finish.

'What?' The old woman stopped, baffled.

Shura opened the front door. What he heard next was so strange that he thought he had misheard.

'Our neighbour was taken away by the Black Raven last night,' Rita said to the old woman in a loud whisper.

Chapter 3

'A black raven? Took father away?' Tanya snorted. 'He's away on business, didn't you hear? Stop making things up.'

Shura couldn't wait until the end of school. He kept looking at his watch. But the hands were so slow, it was like they were barely moving. He couldn't wait to tell Tanya what he'd heard about the black raven. The breaks between the lessons seemed even longer than maths lesson. On his way home, Fontanka Street seemed endless, pedestrians seemed to make it their goal to get in his way and the traffic lights at the crossing took forever to change.

Finally he was at home. He blabbed everything to Tanya. But she only said, 'Stop making things up.' She pulled a stool towards the window.

'I heard it myself!'

'From the neighbour,' Tanya pointed out.

'That's what I said.'

'From Rita.'

'That's what I said!'

'That's what you said!' Tanya teased. 'And children are found in a cabbage patch, buns grow on trees and the moon is made of cheese. Don't you understand? They think you're a baby, so they tell you all sorts of silly things.'

'I'm not a baby,' Shura objected.

'You couldn't find a better person to listen to, could you?' Tanya said disapprovingly. 'She has rollers instead of a brain. She talks for talking's sake. And she's petty. Don't you get it?'

Tanya climbed the stool and stepped on to the window sill. She opened the small ventilation window, stretched out her thin arm and put some crumbs into a little wooden house which hung behind the window. They always fed the birds during the winter. *Petty is bad*, Shura remembered, not sure what it meant. It's bad to be petty, Mother and Father always said.

Tanya opened the small window and waited on the sill for a while in case a bird came. She looked through the cold glass, thinking about how it gets so dreary and lonely in the winter, and that it's so good that there are birds to keep them company.

A little sparrow landed on the feeder and started pecking. Tanya watched him silently for a moment.

'We need to save Father,' Shura said quietly.

Tanya climbed down from the window sill. 'If we did need to save Father, Mother wouldn't have taken Bobby to nursery and she wouldn't have gone to work,' she explained patiently to her little brother. 'Mother said that he went on an urgent business trip. Why would she lie? And anyway, I need to pack my school bag, and we need to have lunch. Why don't you get plates?'

She wasn't worried by her brother's idea at all. *And*, Shura thought, *what if I am worrying for no reason?* Tanya drew the curtains.

Now that there was pale blue sky behind the window, what the neighbour had said didn't seem so sinister any more. *Probably for no reason*, Shura thought. But he poked his tongue out at Tanya anyway.

Tanya moved her books and notebooks from the table and shoved them into her school bag. She adjusted the tablecloth. Shura put down two plates and two spoons. Mother wasn't back till the evening, and Bobby was at nursery till late. Shura and Tanya normally had lunch together.

Tanya carefully unwrapped a big pot of soup from a quilt; Mother would swaddle the pot every morning before going to work. The pot was still warm.

Suddenly they heard a key turning in the door lock.

'Mother?'

Mother came in and took off her coat and boots. She hung her coat on the hook.

'Mama! Hooray!' Shura ran up and threw his arms around her.

'You've come for lunch!' Tanya was surprised.

'No. I'm not going back.'

Shura skipped happily to the cupboard to get another plate. He stopped halfway.

'What about Bobby?'

'I'll collect Bobby in the evening,' Mother said quietly. 'But isn't that great?' she said, carefully looking over the table. 'We'll have lunch together!'

They sat at the table.

Mother didn't utter a word while she was eating her soup. Tanya and Shura were quiet, too. Mother was also silent while eating the meatballs. Then she poured some tea for the children and coffee for herself. Again, not a word.

'Mother, are you all right?' Shura asked carefully.

'Absolutely,' Mother said brightly, and sipped her coffee.

Shura suddenly remembered a time when they were buying china cups. The shop assistant had tapped lightly on each cup with a pencil. Every cup responded with a ring, which meant there were no cracks in the cup. But one of them had a dull sound, because it had an invisible crack. It was replaced with a new cup, with a clear ring. That's what Mother's mood reminded him of. When she said 'Absolutely', her voice didn't have a ring – it had an invisible crack in it. It seemed that Tanya noticed something was wrong, too. They both looked at mother.

'You know what, I'm sick and tired of this job,' Mother suddenly announced.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you don't always want to go to school, do you?'

Shura burst out laughing.

'I don't want this job any more. I'll find another one,' said Mother in a carefree voice, and she tossed her head back. She stirred her coffee.

She carried on stirring, knocking on the edges of the cup with the spoon. The coffee whirled faster and faster, the cup shook and suddenly the coffee went over the edge. A brown spot started spreading on the tablecloth.

'Mother, look!' Tanya cried. The spoon kept ringing on the cup. 'Mama!'

Mother looked at the cup as if she had just woken up. Then she looked at the puzzled children.

'Never mind,' she said and put a paper napkin over the spot. 'I've got a wonderful idea,' she said, changing the subject. 'Tanya won't go to school today. We'll stay at home and read a book together. How does that sound?'

'Brilliant!' Shura cried. 'Or we can go to the cinema?'

'Or we can go to the cinema!' Mother echoed. 'Tanya, why do you look so serious? Would you rather go to school?'

'No.'

Tanya couldn't explain, but it felt strange that mother was so excited. She didn't know why, but she knew for sure there was something wrong. And that made her feel uneasy.

'And then we'll go and collect Bobby. Won't he be surprised!'

'Hooray!' Shura cried out.

So they stayed at home and read books. Then they collected Bobby from nursery. He was thrilled to be romping home with his brother and sister holding him by the hand on each side. Then they played cards and bingo.

Bobby was playing bingo, too. He didn't know his numbers yet. Shura showed him which ones he needed to cover. Bobby squeezed the chips in his little chubby fist.

Soon, Bobby started yawning and blinking sleepily.

'Somebody needs to go to bed.' Mother laughed and gave Bobby a kiss. She started pulling his trousers down, then unbuttoned his stockings.

'What about his bed?' asked Tanya, and gave Shura a look.

Last night, when Shura was 'taken ill', Bobby's bed had been moved to their parents' room. But father had left so quickly, he didn't have time to move Bobby's bed back into the other room.

Shura blushed. Even thinking about what had happened the day before felt disgusting.

Bobby clung to his bed.

'We'll move it! I'll move it,' Shura suggested and blushed even more.

'Never mind, he can sleep here. Go to your room, you two. I'll come and say goodnight.'

Tanya and Shura left through the wardrobe door, back to their bedroom. Then Mother came and they read some more. Mother had never read to them as much as that day. Her voice sounded so lovely, so calm. Gradually, the heavy feeling that something must be wrong, left Tanya. Shura felt calmer, too.

'OK then, time to go to sleep,' Mother finally said, and closed the book.

Lying in his bed, Shura remembered the neighbour's words about the raven again. The room was bright from the yellow rectangle of light on the floor, from a street lamp or from the moon.

'Tanya, what does "petty" mean?' asked Shura.

'Mmm?' She lifted her head from the pillow.

'And why would Rita tell lies about where father is?'

'Well, when you're petty, you want another sofa even if you've already got three,' explained Tanya.

'What's that to do with father?'

'Nothing, it's just the kind of person Rita is.'

'What kind of person?'

'Hey, you two!' Mother said from behind the wardrobe door. 'Stop chatting! Go to sleep.'

'Father says that she's never happy with what she's got and she envies everyone,' Tanya whispered, pulling up her blanket and kicking it to tuck it under her feet.

Shura half-closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he saw himself walking down a long corridor. A creature with a giant raven's beak was slowly and silently approaching him from the other end. It looked like Rita, but like a raven at the same time.

Horrified, Shura started slapping his face with both hands. *Phew, it doesn't hurt, which means this is only a dream*, he thought with relief.

He ran, but couldn't run fast. When you're asleep, in your dream you always run as if you're in a thick fog, or a spider's web – it's much harder than in real life. The corridor didn't end. He could hear some muffled voices behind the walls. Bobby was crying.

'This is just a wardrobe,' Shura suddenly hear Mother say. Her voice sounded very loud and clear.

There was a thud on the bedroom's locked door. Then, after a while, he heard the footsteps walking away.

He heard the strange voices again.

The door to their parents' room clicked shut.

'The Black Raven,' said Rita's voice, very clearly. She sounded thrilled.

Shura opened his eyes.

A pale rectangle of light was shimmering on the ceiling. Shura could hear the sound of an engine running.

Tanya was still asleep.

'Go back in, you menace!' he heard Rita order loudly. 'Nothing for you to nose around here. They've come for the neighbours.'

Somebody else's door creaked, followed by muffled voices. '*Who was it, who was it,*' somebody grumbled. 'The Black Raven. Just gone.'

The Black Raven, again! Shura sat up in bed.

'Tanya!' He jumped up and started shaking her by the shoulders, whispering into her ear. 'Tanya! The Black Raven! He was here! Just now!'

Shura dashed to the window and threw the curtain open. He climbed on to the window sill and pressed his forehead against the cold glass to see the whole street.

He saw the square roof of a car down below – it was a black car, with nothing special about it. The street lights were still on, the windows darkened in the neighbouring buildings. It was empty, outside. Only the old street-cleaner stood resting his arms on his shovel, his sheepskin draped over his shoulders. His bald head reflected the light from the street lamp.

'Where? Let me see. Don't push!' Tanya turned her head from side to side.

'He was just here! I heard him!'

'Shush! You'll wake up Mother and Bobby!'

Two people, holding a person under their arms on each side, disappeared inside the car.

The door shut, the engine roared, the headlights lit up the wet, muddy snow.

At the same time, the rectangle of light on the ceiling started moving to one side, then slid down the wall and disappeared. The rumbling of the engine slowly faded in the damp, dark night.

The street-cleaner, who looked short and plump from above, wrapped himself tighter into his sheepskin. He waited for a little while, then started scraping the snow off the pavement, pushing it off the edges and into a pile. Soon he'd scraped all the snow, erasing the tracks from the black car, and went back inside the building.

'Get off the window sill, before Mother comes in here,' Taya whispered and pulled at the edge of Shura's pyjamas.

'The Raven was here,' Shura said.

'We didn't see anything!'

'Because we were late,' said Shura, annoyed. 'I heard! Somebody said in the corridor: 'Black Raven.'

'Was it Rita again?'

'The others did as well.'

'It can't be true,' Tanya said after a while, straightening her blanket.

'Let's tell Mother everything tomorrow.'

'Everything?' Tanya stopped, holding her blanket.

'Everything. About the spy as well. The truth is better than... this.'

'Typical!'

'What?'

'Don't you dare! I stole the medicine for you, risked my life!'

Shura gave out a sigh.

'Shsh,' Tanya whispered. 'Bobby's asleep.'

They sat quietly and listened for a while. All was quiet.

'Be grateful we didn't wake up Bobby,' Tanya said. 'Don't you dare tell them anything without me. Do you hear? We'll do it together.'

Shura promised.

Then they talked about what they'd tell Mother, and what they'd keep secret. And what would Father say if he found out? But their heads soon became heavy and sleepy. Before they could agree on what they were going to say, they were fast asleep.

Shura woke up first. He needed the toilet. But he remembered that he'd promised Tanya not to go and see their parents without her. That's why he stuck his hand under the blanket and poked Tanya in the side, and then quickly hid under his blanket and turned away.

'There's no need,' said Tanya seriously. 'I'm not asleep, I'll have you know. I've spent the whole morning thinking about how to get you out of trouble.' She pulled Shura's blanket off.

He sat on the bed and put his bare feet on the floor.

'It's so cold. Hasn't Mother stoked the fire?'

Tanya shrugged her shoulders.

They padded across the cold floor to the wardrobe, opened the door and listened. It was quiet in their parents' room. The clock had stopped, the kettle was cold, and so was the stove. Mother wasn't there. Bobby's bed was empty. Mother's boots, coat, gloves, hat and headscarf were gone. The suitcase was missing. Bobby's coat, hat, scarf and felt boots had

disappeared, too. Only his tiny mittens, joined with a long piece of elastic to put through the sleeves, so that Bobby didn't lose them, were hanging on the hook.

Tanya took them down, looking at them in amazement, as if she had never seen them before.

Photo albums, with their empty pages sticking up, were scattered across the floor. They were the albums which mother had ripped the photos from the day before, and fed them to the fire. Things were scattered about as if somebody had picked the whole room up, turned it upside down, shaken everything out of it, and then put it back down.

'Well, I never,' Tanya said.

Shura looked at the mittens, then at Tanya. 'What are you looking at? Mother's probably gone to work, that's all,' he said.

'But she said she'd quit her job.'

'But she said that she'd find another one!'

'What about Bobby?'

'Bobby's at nursery, where else can he be?'

There was a scraping sound at the door. Tanya ran up and opened it. The old woman, who none of the neighbours were friends with, stood at the doorstep, blinking. On the wall behind her hung a bicycle, and underneath it was an old chest: all the neighbours' possessions that couldn't fit in their rooms were normally stored in the corridor.

'Hello. Can I help?' Tanya was surprised to see her.

The old woman looked away and handed Tanya a little purse with a button.

'Your mother asked me to give you this,' she murmured. 'And said that you need to go to your aunt's.'

Shura suddenly noticed that the old woman's eyes were blue. He had never had a chance to look at her face properly before: she would usually sneak into the kitchen and bathroom, trying to keep out of everyone's way.

'Where's Mother?' asked Tanya.

But the woman dropped the purse on the floor and hurried away down the long corridor, into her room.

'What a funny woman.' Tanya shrugged her shoulders. She picked up the purse.

They locked the door and examined the contents of the purse. There was over a hundred roubles there – a whole fortune!

'Wow!' Shura gasped. 'Why did Mother give us so much money?'

'We need to go to Aunt Vera's.'

'Why?'

'Because that's what the old woman said. Mother told her that we need to go to our aunt's.'

Aunt Vera was Mother's sister, and she lived miles away – you needed to take a tram across the Neva. There was a fortress not far from where she lived. It was red-brown, like a cake, with a long, golden spire on top. On the left, hidden by the trees, were the sparkling tops of a mosque, their sky-blue colour competing with the sky itself.

'And this is the money for the tram,' Tanya concluded.

'Isn't it too much for a tram?'

Aunt Vera was a bit strange. She had books and paint tubes all over her flat, which smelt wonderful. She had no children and lived on her own.

'Well, then we must go at once,' Tanya ordered. 'Get dressed!'

They didn't really like going to Aunt Vera's. But what could they do – their mother had told them to go.

'Wait, Tanya, the old woman could have got it wrong.'

'Don't be silly.'

'I'm telling you!' Shura wasn't giving up. 'Mother probably told her "and *if they want*, they can go to Aunt Vera's".'

Tanya looked at her brother seriously. She didn't want to go to Aunt Vera's either; she was a tall, strict woman, with a long nose and cold grey eyes. Aunt Vera never smiled. You would never believe that she was their mother's sister.

Shura noticed that Tanya actually liked his idea. 'Tanya, just think about it. It's clear as day. If yesterday Mother allowed us not to go to school and play at home all day, then today she'd definitely want us to have proper fun!'

Tanya thought for a moment.

'And she left us the money so that we could buy ice cream!' Shura continued.

'Ice cream... You'd better be grateful that I didn't tell her anything about your doings yesterday.'

But Shura wasn't giving up. 'And we can go to the cinema! And buy chocolates! And there'll probably be enough money left to buy you a doll!'

Tanya looked at the wallet, stuffed full of notes. 'Why would mother do that? It's not our birthday or Christmas,' she said with doubt.

But Shura saw her eyes glowing with excitement. 'Because she's our mother! She's the best mother in the world!' He grabbed Tanya's hands. 'So? Shall we run?'

Tanya finally gave up. But she said, in a grown-up tone, 'We won't run. We'll walk.'

'Hooray!' cried Shura. He jumped on to the sofa and started jumping so high that the springs creaked. 'Hooray! Ta-dam-ba-dam! The best mother in the world!'

Chapter 4

They decided to have breakfast before going out. But they weren't allowed to use matches, so they couldn't light the cooker. Tanya grabbed the kettle and said, 'I'll ask one of the neighbours. Cut some bread, Shura.' And she popped out of the room.

The kitchen was usually busy in the mornings: everyone making breakfast, Aunt Rita heating her rollers, someone doing their laundry in a big bowl on a stool, someone else washing up.

She came back to the room very quickly, holding the empty kettle. Shura had only had time to take the bread out of the breadbin.

'They're all a bit strange today,' Tanya said. 'As if I'm invisible to them.'

'So what are we going to do without tea?'

'I know what we'll do,' Tanya said after a pause. 'We'll have breakfast at The Nord! We'll have eclairs and cream puffs and hot chocolate. And then we'll buy some cakes to take home, to treat mother and Bobby!'

The Nord was the best café in town. The huge windows faced Nevsky Prospekt, Leningrad's central street and there were china figurines on display in the shop window. The tables had glass covers over them, and the waitresses had white hats with lace on. You would only go to The Nord on a very special occasion.

'Really?' Shura exclaimed. It was an amazing idea!

'But we need to tidy up first,' Tanya said. 'Mother probably overslept this morning. Looks like she was in such a hurry – stuff scattered around. She'll be pleased to see that we tidied up.'

'That's amazing!' Shura couldn't contain himself. He grabbed a chair and dragged it to the wall, then picked up a book from the floor.

Tanya started putting away the photo albums. Then she picked up and carefully folded all the clothes.

The thought of the comfortable, soft green sofas, cream puffs, eclairs, hot chocolate, and everything that The Nord was famous for was egging them on.

Finally, Tanya said, 'OK, that's better. Let's go.'

They put their coats on. At the door, they cast a final glance at the results of their work: the room looked 'immaculate', as father would say. And happily stomping down the stairs, they rushed outside.

The day broke, it was bright.

The street-cleaner was sprinkling the icy pavements with sand. Tanya poked the pavement with a tip of her boot: it was slippery.

'Hello!' cried Shura. 'What kind of spring is this? So warm during the day but still freezing at night.'

That's what Mother used to always say.

The street-cleaner looked at them in a strange way as he watched them walk past, then started throwing handfuls of sand again.

Shura turned back to look at his windows, like he always did. Blue sky reflected in the glass. He noticed Aunt Doussya's face in the ground floor window and smiled at her. But she quickly closed the curtain. She was probably still angry about the broken window.

As they were about to cross the road, Tanya suddenly stopped. 'Listen, if I don't eat a pie right away, I'll die of hunger. I won't last till the café.'

A street-seller with a box of pies, covered with a thick blanket to keep them warm, was only a few yards away, on the corner. As soon as Shura smelt the amazing fragrance of the deep-fried pies, a whole orchestra started playing in his stomach.

'Let's start with a pie, then!' Shura agreed, and they ran towards the seller. 'Can I please have one of your delicious pies with jam?' he said to her.

'Huh, have you got any money?' the seller said, incredulous. Her white apron was greasy.

People hurried past them. The street was busy.

'Two with jam, please,' Tanya said, passing her the money. She took two pies and gave one to her brother.

Shura plunged his teeth into the soft dough, and a hot, thin line of strawberry jam came out of the other end of the pie. Shura laughed with delight: a pie first thing in the morning, and no need to go to school, either!

Large, cold drops of rain were falling off the roofs like diamonds and sparkling in the sun. A flock of pigeons soared above the buildings, flapping their wings, and flew away, gleaming in various colours.

'So, what next? Cinema? There's a morning showing at the *Aurora*,' Tanya suggested nonchalantly.

'You know what, Tanya,' Shura suddenly said, licking the jam off the palm of his hand and catching up with his sister. 'How about we find the Black Raven, who kidnapped our father, first? Can you imagine Mother's face when she gets home? She'll be so pleased we found him.'

Tanya rolled her eyes and gave a sigh. She wiped her lips with the edge of the paper from the pie.

'What?' Shura said.

'Enough of that silliness. It's not funny.'

'It's not silliness! I heard myself...'

Tanya pulled the sleeve of his coat. 'Oh, let's go already. We'll be late for the cinema.'

'That means you don't love Father!' Shura blurted out.

'I don't love Father?' Tanya's face was red. 'Well, all right then. Let's walk up to somebody right away and ask them about a Black Raven who kidnaps people. Let people laugh in our faces! Maybe then you'll be ashamed of yourself. Who will you believe? Will you believe a policeman? Let's find a policeman right now.'

They walked along the whole length of Vladimirsky Prospekt. Passers-by stayed mostly on the sunny side, enjoying the first spring sunshine. Cars rolled past.

Finally, on the corner of Nevsky, they saw a traffic policeman. In his shining helmet, cuffs and shoulder belt, he was conducting the traffic like it was an orchestra. One side of the street would stop as soon as he raised his hand, and the other would start moving at the same time.

'Excuse me, sir!' Tanya called and waved her hand.

'Wait, Tanya!' Shura became worried. He suddenly realised that the Black Raven probably didn't exist. 'We don't need the policeman!'

'Yes, we do,' Tanya said stubbornly. 'We'll sort it out once and for all, before I become sick of your fairy tales.'

The policeman came up to them with a self-important look on his face. He tapped the side of his helmet with this hand. 'Hello, children. How can I help?'

Shura couldn't utter a word.

'Hello, sir!' Tanya said bravely.

'Are you lost, children?' the policeman asked.

'Oh, not at all! We know where we are. We even know the traffic rules!' Tanya smiled politely.

Shura kicked her lightly with his boot. 'Stop talking nonsense!'

'Can we ask you a question, sir?' Tanya asked in her sweetest voice.

'Of course you can,' the policeman replied and bent down a little, so he could hear better. He was a very pleasant man. He had a lovely smile which made his cheeks look like two perfectly round apples.

Tanya tried to look as serious as she could, which made Shura want to kick her harder. What was she showing off for?

'This little boy wants to ask you one very ridiculous question.'

Shura pulled Tanya's plait. *This is too much!*

The policeman laughed. 'I'm all ears, my friend.' He crouched in front of Shura. 'What kind of question is it? I'll answer as best as I can.' He kept smiling.

His attention and grown-up attitude encouraged Shura. He plucked up the whole of his courage and said, 'Sir. My father was taken away by the Black Raven—'

'You're surely going to laugh,' Tanya interrupted, but stopped.

The pleasant policeman didn't laugh at all. His smile disappeared, and his apple cheeks became pale. He slowly stood up. Even his lips had lost their colour. His eyes started darting around.

'Run!' Tanya squealed, pulling Shura's sleeve. They dashed across the road.

'Stop!' the policeman shouted.

Shura ran, barely able to catch up with his sister.

They darted into an arch of one of the buildings. Three courtyards, which Leningrad was so famous for, separated by stone arches, lay ahead of them. They led to Fontanka Street, where the children knew they could lose themselves in the crowd and hide from their pursuer. They ran through the first courtyard. Somebody behind them said 'this way', and they could hear the echoing thud of the policeman's boots.

The third arch was blocked by a gate with a lock on it. Luckily, they managed to squeeze through the bars, bending and wriggling. They carried on running. Finally, the sunlit granite embankment of Fontanka Street loomed ahead, with the iron lace of the fence and the river behind it.

The policeman shook the bars of the gate in helpless anger. He was too big to fit through.

'Hey, anybody there?' He banged on the gate. The bars made a booming noise. 'Who locks a gate in the daytime?'

Shura and Tanya didn't hear the rest. They ran along the embankment towards the bridge, the circus, as far as possible.

'Shura, keep up,' Tanya panted, breathless. By the time they reached the circus, they realised they weren't being followed any more. Tanya slowed down. Her legs were shaking. Shura tried to catch his breath – he was gasping more out of fear than tiredness. He had been in this kind of trouble with Valya many times: they'd been chased by street-cleaners, shouted at by passers-by. But to be chased by a policeman, like he was a criminal of some sort? This had never happened before.

Shura took off his hat, his head steaming. Tanya suddenly burst into laughter, looking at him. He wiped his face and sat down on a short stone bollard by one of the buildings. These bollards were used for tying horses to, a long time ago.

'That was so funny.' Tanya couldn't stop laughing. 'Did you see his face?'

'Started chasing us like mad!' Shura laughed, too, remembering the policeman jumping by the gate.

Tanya doubled over with laughter. 'I'm going to burst now!'

'Tanya! Tanya!' It suddenly dawned on him. He stopped laughing.

'What?' Tanya wiped her tears.

'This means that the Black Raven exists.'

Tanya didn't say anything. Her smile faded.

'He does exist, Tanya.'

Tanya pulled off one of her mittens, snapped an icicle from one of the window sills and put it in her mouth.

'The Black Raven took Father away,' he made himself say, knowing Tanya wouldn't like it.

Tanya said nothing.

Shura broke an icicle for himself, too. His teeth ached.

They both sucked on their icicles with grave faces. Both were thinking about what the other one would say next. They looked at each other.

Then Tanya spluttered with laughter.

'You're a fool,' Shura said sulkily. He waited until she stopped laughing. 'Think about it. A policeman wouldn't start chasing you for no reason!'

'Shura, he was simply cross at us for telling him a load of rubbish, for distracting him from work. And for not being at school in the middle of the day.'

Shura had nothing to say to this.

They were silent for a few moments.

'Shall we go to The Nord, then?' Shura jumped off the bollard and brushed the snow from his coat.

'I've got an idea,' Tanya said suddenly. She crunched the rest of the icicle, and then said, 'Because the Black Raven is a raven, and raven is a bird, we'll ask the birds about him!'

Shura looked at her carefully. Her face seemed serious, but there was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. *That's right*, Shura thought, *she's having me on*. But he decided to play along.

'Why not,' he said quietly, pretending he agreed. 'Ask them then.'

'I think, you should ask,' Tanya insisted. 'You were the one to hear about the Black Raven.'

What a sly monkey, Shura thought, *she's doing that on purpose so that she could laugh at me later*.

'No, Tanya, I'll only mess it up again. You'll do it better!'

'No, I won't. It should be you. Just make sure you ask them politely. A kind word can do wonders.'

Just then, flapping their wings, two crows landed on the lawn nearby.

'Look, crows!' Tanya exclaimed.

The birds, in their grey and black suits, walked up and down the wet snow as if holding their hands behind their backs. They were carefully scrutinising the ground, looking for something to eat.

'OK then,' Shura finally agreed.

He saw Tanya's face light up for a second, and then become coy again. *Just you wait, Tanya*, he thought. *Let's wait and see who wins this one*.

Shura started walking towards the crows, then slowed down. He pretended to be unsure of what he was doing, and hesitated.

'What? What are you waiting for?' Tanya asked impatiently.

Now I've caught you, Shura thought. 'What am I going to tell them?' he asked.

'The truth. About the Raven, about Father.'

'No, I mean, how shall I tell them?'

Tanya rolled her eyes in her usual manner, meaning 'what a silly child!'

'Are you serious?' she said.

Shura sighed, still pretending. And he thought, *Who's going to laugh last?*

'This is what you need to do,' Tanya said.

She straightened her back, cupped her hands by her mouth, and prepared to make a speech.

The crows stopped and looked her suspiciously.

'Dear esteemed sirs, I hope you allow us address you. Could you do us a favour and let us ask you a question?' she said in one breath, making pauses where necessary and enunciating clearly.

The crows stopped and looked at one another, blinking their black eyes, their beaks shining in the sun.

'Do you understand what you need to do now?' Tanya turned to Shura.

And just as he was going to shout 'Tricked you!' and push Tanya in the back, one of the crows opened his beak and said, 'Yes, what would you like?'