



THE
**ROMANOV
RANSOM**

A SAM AND REMI FARGO ADVENTURE

**CLIVE CUSSLER
AND ROBIN BURCELL**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS NEW YORK

PUTNAM

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PROLOGUE

I

CRIMEAN PENINSULA

JULY 1918

The old woman stood with tears in her eyes as two men loaded the last of the three wooden trunks onto the back of a hay wagon. The first was filled to the top with strings of pearls, loose diamonds, and precious stones. Gold bars and coins in the second. The third contained the jewelry gifted to the royal family over the last three hundred years, diamond-studded tiaras, necklaces, and rings. She ignored all of it, her gaze only on the much smaller chest that her maid was carrying to the wagon.

“Wait!” she commanded.

Her maid turned toward her. “What’s wrong?”

How could she voice her feelings at such a time? The jewels and gold meant nothing to her. But that last chest . . . She watched as the man, Pyotr, took it from her maid. “One last look.”

Pyotr deferred to the other man, a stranger to her, who climbed into the front of the wagon, taking the reins of the two horses that were champing at the bit. “We’re already late.”

She turned toward Pyotr. “Please . . .”

“Be quick.” He set the small chest on the back of the wagon, stepping back to allow her access.

CLIVE CUSSLER

Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna lifted the latch, opened the lid, then pulled off the layer of lamb's wool, revealing four bejeweled eggs that she'd managed to take with her when she went into hiding after the Bolsheviks took over Russia. Her breath caught as she lifted the Royal Danish Egg, cradling it in her hands. It had nothing to do with the beauty of the moonlight reflecting on the precious stones set in gold, surrounding the white and light blue enamel, nor the meticulous workmanship by the jeweler, Fabergé, who wrought each so that it was a masterpiece of beauty and delight to any who beheld it.

"Enough," the driver said coldly.

"Give her a moment," the maid told him.

"They're just jewels."

"To you," Maria said, taking in every facet. "To me, these hold memories . . ."

This particular egg contained a surprise of miniature portraits of her parents. Given to her by her late husband, they were the stories of happier times with him, her children, and later her grandchildren, who were still so very young.

"You'll see your family again," her maid said. "I know it."

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat, and lowered the egg into its lamb's wool nest next to the other three. "Thank you . . ."

Pyotr, about to close the lid, suddenly looked at her. "Do they know how many eggs are here?"

Maria shook her head. "No. Only that I was going to include them."

He eyed the small case, then removed the egg she'd held, fluffing up the downy wool and repositioning the others so that it looked as though the case had only contained three.

She took it from him, holding back her tears. "I have no way to repay you. Thank you."

"Tell no one. Ever."

"I won't," she said as he covered the cargo under the hay in the wagon, then climbed into the front. "I promise."

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

He gave a nod as the driver shook the reins, the horses racing off with a king's ransom in the back of the wagon. Watching until it disappeared, Maria Feodorovna hugged the egg to her chest, equal parts of hope and terror filling her heart.

"YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT," the driver told Pyotr as the wagon jarred across the hardened dirt road.

"Why not?"

"Because it belongs to the people."

"They won't miss one small thing. Not with everything that she turned over to us."

"That's not for you to decide."

Pyotr saw the firm set to the man's jaw. He didn't pretend to know what the revolution was about, beyond the Bolsheviks' belief that the Emperor and his family had lived in excess and splendor while the masses faced hunger and an uncertain future. The people's wrath carried over, even after Nicholas II had stepped down from the throne and the royal family was imprisoned.

Some of it, he understood. Much, he did not. "What difference does it make if we allow her a few happy memories in her time of fear?"

"The difference? You sound as though you sympathize with her."

"She's just an old woman."

"You'd be wise to keep those thoughts to yourself, lest you end up like her family."

Having worked for the Romanovs for a number of years, the last thing Pyotr wanted or needed was for anyone to think of him as a sympathizer. In these times, that line of thinking led to death. "I wasn't thinking. You're right."

The man said something below his breath, then urged the team of horses faster. For the next several days, Pyotr never mentioned the

Romanovs, and he hoped that the incident with the Dowager Empress was long forgotten. It was nightfall by the time they reached Yekaterinburg, but instead of driving toward the governor's house where the Romanovs were imprisoned, they turned left.

"Where are we going?" Pyotr asked.

"Meeting someone to drop this off."

Panic set in. "If we don't deliver this in time, they'll kill the royal family."

"What do you care? Their fate is *not* your business."

"But—the ransom . . . The Dowager Empress entrusted us with it. To buy their passage."

"Ransom?" the man laughed. "You don't really believe they were ever going to let them go, do you?"

"We promised."

"You fool. What'd you think would happen? That the Bolsheviks would take this as payment, then set them free? Soon, Maria Feodorovna"—he turned and spat, his expression one of disgust at the mention of the Dowager Empress's name—"will meet the same fate as her son and his disgusting spawn."

Only then did Pyotr realize they were too late. The entire Romanov family had been killed. The children's faces flashed in his mind—the last time he'd seen them, before the clash of war, they'd been so happy . . .

"Where are we going, then?"

"To bring that as proof." He nodded toward the back of the wagon. "When they see what the old woman stole from Russia, trying to buy her son's freedom, she and every last Romanov will be hunted down, as will anyone who supports them."

Of all the royal family, Maria Feodorovna's life meant something. Unlike her son and his wife, she'd served Russia well. This war was her son's making. His failure to lead.

But if, as he said, they came after *everyone* who supported the roy-

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

als, Pyotr was bound to be high on that list, especially once they learned he'd left Maria with one of the eggs. The very thought frightened him, especially when he realized where they were going. The old barn where a number of royalists had been shot. "Are you going to tell them what I did?"

"Of course. Your fate is for the people to decide."

They were going to kill him.

Pyotr's hands shook and he tucked them at his side, stealing a glance at the man beside him, eyeing the pistol at his hip.

The wagon wheels hit a rut, jarring the vehicle and throwing him against the driver. He grabbed the gun and pushed away, pointing it.

The driver turned, trying to grab the weapon. "What—"

Pyotr fired.

The shot hit him in the chest. He fell to the side, letting loose the reins. Pyotr shoved him from his seat and he tumbled down to the ground. Grabbing the reins, he stopped the team, then turned them around, pausing beside the fallen man.

He looked up at Pyotr, his face turning gray. "Why?"

"Saving my life. And Maria Feodorovna's."

"They'll bury you right next to her. The moment they find you or anyone else with that treasure."

"They'll never find it." He shook the reins, then headed toward the castle. He knew of a hidden panel in the Amber Room. The Bolsheviks would have to disassemble the entire place to find it. Somehow, he'd get word to the Dowager Empress that she needed to leave, that they intended to kill her.

And maybe one day they could come back for the treasure.

II

BUENOS AIRES
DECEMBER 1947

There must be something we can do. We're not asking for much. I'll pay it back. Every cent."

The desperation that twelve-year-old Klaus Simon heard in his father's voice twisted at his heart and he edged closer to the kitchen door, straining to hear the conversation in the front room.

"Please, Ludwig," his father continued. "If you could find it within you to help us this once."

"Actually, there is something . . ." For several seconds, the only thing Klaus heard was the ticking of the kitchen clock behind him. Finally, his uncle said, "I'm in need of help during a short trip to Santiago. If you agree to my conditions, I'll make it worth your while."

"I'll do anything. Anything at all."

"Not you. Your boy."

Surprised, Klaus pressed his ear against the door. "I don't understand," his father said. "What would Klaus have to do?"

"Nothing much. More companion than anything else. These trips can be tedious."

"How long would he be gone?"

“A few days at the most. More important, we’re willing to pay well.”

A long stretch of silence followed before his father answered. “I don’t know. Perhaps we’ll find another way—”

Klaus pushed open the door, bursting into the room. “I can do it. I can.”

His father’s brow furrowed. “I told you to wait in the kitchen.”

“I’m sorry,” Klaus said, stealing a glance at his uncle. He barely remembered the man from when they’d lived with him in Germany. Only that his Uncle Ludwig Strassmair had argued with Klaus’s mother when he’d brought notice that Klaus’s older brother, Dietrich, had been killed in the war. Dietrich, apparently, was not fighting for Germany, as everyone thought, but for the resistance against Nazism. His mother never recovered from Dietrich’s death—or the scandal—and after selling everything to buy them passage to Argentina, she’d cut off all contact with her brother. “Let me go. Please, Father.”

Uncle Ludwig smiled at Klaus. “See? Even the boy is willing.”

His father, however, was not so quick to agree. “Let me talk it over with him. I’ll telephone to let you know my decision.”

“*Danke.*”

His father waited until Uncle Ludwig drove off, then turned a troubled glance down the hall toward the bedroom where his wife slept. With a tired sigh, he looked at Klaus. “You heard what he said. It’s only for a few days. To Chile and back.”

“I heard.” Klaus watched his father, trying to figure out what he wasn’t telling him. “He only wants a companion. That doesn’t sound too hard.”

“There’s something you should know . . .”

“What, Papa?” he asked when his father didn’t continue.

Again, that sigh. This one more weary than the last. “Your uncle . . . He’s a Nazi. As are his friends.”

Hope fled at the realization that his mother would *never* allow

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

this. It didn't matter that Dietrich had chosen to fight for the resistance, she blamed the Nazis for his death.

His father glanced down the hallway once more, then back at Klaus. "Still . . . the war is over. No need to tell her. *Or* your sister, who blabs everything."

"But—"

"It would break your mother's heart." He put his hands on Klaus's shoulders, looking him in the eye, giving a half smile. "If there was any other way, we would find it. Yes? But there isn't . . . You understand?"

Klaus understood all too well. He and his father could overlook the source of income if it bought the medicine his mother desperately needed. What did it matter if a few Nazis slipped into the country? And, as his father said, the war was over. Those men were simply Germans like him.

Besides, it was only for a few days.

Somehow, though, his mother must have overheard, because when he went to visit her, she tried to dissuade him. "I'm going to die anyway," she said from her sickbed. "What good will that money be then?"

"I won't let you," Klaus told her, trying not to see how frail she'd become. These days, she barely got out of bed.

"Dietrich had no choice, fighting against Hitler. We didn't leave soon enough. But I taught *you* to do what is right. In this, *you* have a choice."

"This is right. For you."

She said nothing, merely closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

That night, when he went to say good-bye, he thought she was still asleep. But when he turned to leave, she opened her eyes. "Klaus . . ."

He came into the room, sitting on the edge of her bed.

She reached out, took his hand in hers, her grasp weak, her skin cool. "Promise me . . ."

“Promise what?” he asked, having to lean close to hear.

“Follow your heart . . .” She reached up, touched his chest, then lowered her hand, closing her eyes. “Dietrich . . .” Maybe she was hallucinating, seeing his dead brother instead of him. Thinking she’d fallen asleep once more, he started to rise. But she opened her eyes, her soft smile melting his heart. “Do that, Klaus . . . You’ll be rewarded . . . Promise me?”

“I promise,” he said, wondering if she even had two days to live. What if she died before he returned . . . ?

No. He refused to think such a thing. He had to do this. If he didn’t get the medicine, she would die.

With a heavy heart, he leaned down, kissed her forehead, seeing that she’d fallen asleep again. “I love you,” he whispered, then left with his Uncle Ludwig Strassmair to Buenos Aires.

“HERR STRASSMAIR. GOOD. You’re here. Come in. Come in.”

Klaus, his uncle’s suitcase in hand, was about to follow him into the office when he thought he heard something behind them. He stopped and looked down the darkened hallway. The wind, he decided, then trailed his uncle into the office, where Herr Heinrich, a gray-haired man in a military-style jacket, sat behind a battered wooden desk, his hand lying atop a brown folder. A blond-haired woman about the age of Klaus’s uncle, mid-forties, stood behind him. She eyed Klaus. “This is the boy?”

“Klaus,” Ludwig said. “My sister’s son. Good German stock.” He took the case from Klaus, then guided him to the door. “Wait outside. We’ll be just a few minutes.”

Klaus walked into the hallway, remembering his father’s warning to mind his own business. But Ludwig had left the door open, and he couldn’t help overhearing the conversation.

“Were you followed?” Herr Heinrich asked.

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

“No,” Ludwig replied. “I was very careful.”

Klaus glanced down the darkened hall, suddenly worried about that noise he’d heard when they’d entered. What if they *had* been followed? He edged closer to the open door, wondering if he should say something.

“So,” Ludwig said, “we’re proceeding?”

“We are. But first I want to see what you’ve brought before it’s all sold. Open it.”

A moment later, Klaus heard Herr Heinrich give a low whistle, while the woman said, “Amazing. I have only heard tales of their magnificence.”

Unable to resist, Klaus peered through the crack in the door. Herr Heinrich held a bejeweled, egg-shaped object. The green iridescence reminded Klaus of a small jade pendant his mother used to wear. Gold filigree vines wrapped around the egg, and diamonds sparkled along the vines like bright flowers. “Which one do I have?” Heinrich asked, turning the piece back and forth, the light catching on the diamonds.

“This,” his uncle said, “is the Empire Nephrite Egg.”

“How many eggs do you have?”

“Only three. But also several other chests that Maria Feodorovna managed to smuggle out of Russia when she fled to the Crimea. One contains many of the crown jewels belonging to the Dowager Empress, the others are filled with hundreds of loose diamonds, precious stones, and gold. It’s clear that she paid well for the release of her son and his family.”

“And yet the Bolsheviks killed them anyway,” Herr Heinrich said. “Rather fitting that we’re using the Romanov Ransom to fund our strike against Russia.” He turned the egg about in his hands, the diamonds glinting in the overhead light. “A shame your men couldn’t have gotten the Amber Room as well. A sight to behold.”

“Hard to play refugee while smuggling something that size. These were difficult enough to get out of Germany without leaving a trail.”

“And that pilot? I heard he was working with the Allied Forces.”

“Lieutenant Lambrecht?”

“Yes. What if he talks? He could lead them right to us.”

“Unfortunately for him, he’s dead. My men sabotaged his plane. The last word was that it crashed somewhere in Morocco.”

“What if someone finds the plane? Our plans—”

“—are in code. By the time someone does find them—assuming they ever do—we’ll be in Santiago, setting everything in motion. It’ll be too late.”

Klaus had no idea what they were talking about, nor did he want to know. As he started to back away from the door, Herr Heinrich looked up and saw him staring. “What’s this? You! Come here.”

He froze.

Ludwig turned, saw him, then gave a sharp nod. “Klaus!”

He entered, worried what his uncle would do, when his glance strayed to the egg, even more beautiful up close. “I didn’t mean to see. I just—”

The woman laughed. “You want to hold it?”

Klaus shook his head, afraid he’d drop it.

Herr Heinrich handed the egg to Ludwig, who wrapped it in a square of gray wool cloth.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” the woman said.

Klaus nodded, unable to look away, as Uncle Ludwig carefully returned the egg to its case. He saw two more egg-shaped forms beneath their wool wrapping.

“Fabergé,” she said, though the name meant nothing to Klaus. “Do you know what they’re for? Why you’re taking them to Chile?”

He shook his head. He only knew he was to dress warm because they were flying over the Andes Mountains. And that the money he would make would keep his mother alive. “No, *fräulein*.”

“To bring in the Fourth Reich—”

“Greta!” Herr Heinrich started to rise.

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

Ludwig, clearly upset over the interruptions, or perhaps Greta's revelation, snapped the case shut. "We should go. The hour grows late, and our plane awaits. You have the papers?"

"Of course," Herr Heinrich said, sliding them from the folder. Ludwig was reading the pages when Heinrich's phone rang. He answered, listened, then said, "Yes. He's right here." Heinrich held the phone toward Uncle Ludwig. "For you."

Ludwig set the papers on top of the suitcase. As he took the phone, his coat brushed the topmost page onto the floor.

It landed at Klaus's feet and he reached down to pick it up, seeing the words *Unternehmen Werwolf* at the top. Before he got past the first lines, trying to figure out what Operation Werewolf was about, Greta took the paper from him, setting it facedown on the stack.

"Hold on," Ludwig said into the phone. He covered the mouthpiece. "Greta, I'll meet you at the car. Take the boy and close the door."

The woman put her hand on Klaus's shoulder, guiding him into the hallway. "Come with me, Klaus."

He followed Greta outside, where Ludwig's sleek black Mercedes sedan gleamed beneath the bright moon. As she led him to the car, he glanced back toward the office, thinking of the papers that Herr Heinrich had given to his uncle. His father might be willing to overlook Uncle Ludwig's past, but Klaus didn't think he'd turn a blind eye to reviving the Nazi Party and starting the Fourth Reich. His mother, he knew, would be horrified.

She'd want him to tell his uncle that he couldn't go with him. Especially after what he'd read on that document.

"... blame the Americans for a bomb strike on Russia ..."

Surely his father would understand why he couldn't go?

Someone shouted as the office door burst open. Ludwig raced out, suitcase in one hand, gun in the other. "Get in the car!"

A shot split the air, and Ludwig turned, firing into the doorway.

Crack! Crack!

Klaus froze. Uncle Ludwig ran to the driver's side, shot twice more, then threw the suitcase in. "Hurry!"

Greta pushed Klaus toward the car. "Get in."

He jumped into the back, Greta the front, as Uncle Ludwig started the car, cursing as the engine sputtered, then kicked in.

The vehicle sped off, making a sharp turn, throwing Klaus against the door.

Heart thudding in his chest, he finally dared a look, seeing nothing but a cloud of dust behind them. "What happened?" he asked. "Why were they shooting at you?"

Several seconds passed before his uncle responded. "Robbers. After the treasure. They came in from the back as I was leaving."

Greta said, "Herr Heinrich?"

"Dead. They killed him."

"What about the papers?" she asked.

"In the suitcase."

"Good," she replied. "If they found those—"

"Enough!" Uncle Ludwig looked at Klaus in the rearview mirror, then back at the road.

"Take me home," Klaus said, his voice cracking. "I don't want to do this."

"No," Uncle Ludwig snapped, driving even faster. "Too late."

"I—I don't understand. Why do you need me?"

Greta answered. "Because no one looks twice at a man and woman with their son."

The only reason that would make sense is if they knew they were being watched. They were using him as a prop.

Klaus wondered what Dietrich would do if he were in this position. Was this why he'd died? Surely it was none of Klaus's business. Besides, he was only twelve.

Follow your heart . . .

In his heart, he knew that his mother would choose death rather

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

than allow the Nazis to come back into power. And if his presence made it easier for his uncle to succeed?

He knew the answer.

Keeping an eye on the back of his uncle's head, he edged his hand toward the door. As soon as the car slowed for a turn, he threw the door open, jumped out, tumbling into the street. Ignoring the pain, he scrambled to his feet, then ran. Tires screeched as his uncle slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a stop.

"Klaus!"

He didn't turn, just barreled on. There was a light in the building at the corner, and he darted toward it, seeing an open door. Music drifted out—an Italian folk song—along with loud voices and laughter. "Help!" he screamed. "Please! Someone help me!"

He reached the doorway just as his uncle grabbed him by the shoulder. "Klaus!"

"Help me!" he said, trying to pull free.

A man, holding a wine bottle, looked out at them.

"*Mio figlio*," his uncle said.

The man nodded.

"No!" Klaus shouted as his uncle dragged him away. "No *mio figlio*! I'm not his son! I'm *not*!"

"Shut up!" Uncle Ludwig backhanded him across the face. "Do that again and I'll *kill* you. Understand?"

Pain mixed with terror as he read the anger in his uncle's eyes. Klaus glanced toward the bar. The man who'd come to the door lifted the wine bottle to his mouth and took a long drink, then walked away. The street was empty, dark, and Klaus was utterly alone. He looked at his uncle and silently nodded.

"Good," Ludwig said, digging his fingers into Klaus's arm, holding tight. "Now, walk quietly back to the car. Not a word."

Heart racing, Klaus nodded again. Somehow, he'd find a way out of this. For Dietrich. For his mother.

“Get in,” his uncle ordered when they reached the car.

The woman turned toward him as he slid into the backseat. “You shouldn’t run, Klaus. It’s only for a few days. And we *know* where you live.”

After they arrived at the airstrip, his fear grew as they loaded the chests from the trunk into the hold, then boarded the four-engine Avro Lancastrian, Uncle Ludwig not letting go of the suitcase. The plane had been used as a bomber during the war, later imported to Argentina and converted for passenger use. Although there were nine seats, single file, there were only five passengers. His uncle directed Klaus to sit, then took the seat in front of him, setting the case with the eggs and the Operation Werewolf papers on the floor beside him.

Such an ordinary suitcase . . .

What was in it was anything but ordinary, Klaus thought as someone shouted from outside the plane.

There was a commotion at the door, and he turned, saw a man, wearing a tan overcoat, enter.

“Sorry,” the man said, out of breath. “Didn’t mean to hold up everyone. Joe Schmidt,” he said by way of introduction. He spoke perfect German, but the accent was something Klaus couldn’t place. There was a sheen of perspiration on Schmidt’s brow, and he reached up, wiped it with the back of his hand. Winded, he stood there a moment, looked around, his gaze catching on Klaus, and then his uncle, before taking the seat just behind Klaus.

Once the door was shut, the engines started, and the plane moved down the runway. Klaus gripped the edge of his seat as they lifted off. He closed his eyes, trying to take even breaths. He was scared. Part of his fear came from the fact that he’d never been in a plane before. He looked down at that suitcase, thinking about what Greta had said about the Fourth Reich, the papers and the cases of jewels his uncle was carrying, and the men shooting at them as they fled. And then

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

there was Greta's comment about needing Klaus with them. To keep from being noticed.

Who would be watching them?

Something made him look back at the man who'd boarded last. Joe Schmidt. Their gazes met. The man gave a slight nod, and Klaus turned away. Somehow, over the roar of the engines, he fell into a fitful sleep.

Something jarred him awake. Klaus opened his eyes, confused by his surroundings. He looked around, then behind him as he felt his seat shudder and saw that Joe Schmidt had Uncle Ludwig's suitcase. When the man realized he'd been caught, he raised his finger to his lips.

They *were* being watched. His heart sped up a little at the hope that someone was going to stop the Nazis. He dared a slight nod, wanting to reassure the man that he wasn't about to tell, and he glanced toward his uncle's seat, noticing his head tilted to the side. Sleeping. Or so he thought until Ludwig dropped his hand down toward the floor where the suitcase had been, his fingers reaching at nothing. He jumped from his seat, looking around, frantic. The moment he saw Schmidt with his suitcase, he lunged.

Schmidt shoved the case upward. His uncle blocked it with his arm, then slammed his right fist into Schmidt's jaw. Schmidt grabbed Ludwig by his shoulders, pulling down as he brought up his knee.

Ludwig staggered back, then reached beneath his coat, drawing his gun. Klaus turned toward the other passengers, willing them to get up and help, but they cowered in their seats. Only Greta stood, gripping Klaus by his arm. He looked back as Schmidt threw himself at Ludwig, ramming him with all his weight. The two men tripped over the suitcase, crashing to the floor. The gun flew from Ludwig's grasp, landing near Klaus. Greta pushed him aside. She grabbed the gun while Ludwig overpowered the man, pummeling at his face until he lost consciousness. "Kill him!" Greta said.

His uncle pulled a knife from his boot. In a flash, he rammed it beneath the man's sternum.

Klaus stared in shock at the growing red stain on Schmidt's white shirt. His stomach roiled with nausea, and he took several deep breaths trying to calm it. "Why . . . ?"

Greta must have heard him over the roar of the engines. "He's a spy sent to stop us."

Turbulence jolted the plane, throwing Klaus and Greta against the seats. She dropped the gun as she tried to break her fall. Klaus grabbed it, his hand shaking as he pointed it at her.

She tried to stand, grabbing for the gun, but he shoved her back into the seat. She reached for him. "Klaus. You don't want to do this."

Ludwig's brows went up a fraction when he realized that Klaus had the gun.

"Give me the gun, Klaus . . ." Uncle Ludwig took a step forward. "It's over now. There's no reason to fight."

Tears clouded Klaus's vision as he backed away. "I'll shoot you."

"It won't do any good," his uncle said. He glanced at Greta, giving her a sharp nod.

She stood, taking a step toward Klaus. He pointed the gun at her and she stopped.

His uncle moved to her side. "When this plane lands, those papers *will* be delivered. But if you help me get them there, you'll be rewarded. You *and* your father will have all the money you need. Think of your sister."

Klaus blinked away the tears, seeing the dead man, wondering if it was worth dying for . . . Was this how his brother died?

"Klaus . . ." Uncle Ludwig held out his hand. "Your mother wouldn't want anything to happen to you. Give me the gun."

Follow your heart . . . Do that . . . You'll be rewarded. Promise me . . .

His mother's voice sounded so clear in his head. Heart beating, he

THE ROMANOV RANSOM

backed away from them, turning the gun toward the two passengers who tried to stop him. “Get out of my way!” he shouted as he continued backing up until he bumped into the ladder that led up to the cockpit.

“Klaus!” Uncle Ludwig yelled. “Get over here!”

He kept the gun pointed at them. “Stay away,” he said, grabbing at the ladder, climbing with one hand, as he kept one eye on them. He poked his head into the cockpit, saw the pilot at the controls, either unaware of what had transpired at the back of the plane or too busy trying to fly it to worry.

Klaus took a deep breath, looking down at his uncle.

“No!” Ludwig yelled, running forward. “Stop him!”

Someone grabbed Klaus’s leg as he swung around. Too late. He shot the pilot. The man slumped over, and the plane jolted. Klaus fell into the cockpit. The black sky turned white as they spiraled toward the snowy mountainside, the roar of engines drowning out the screams.

In those few moments, Klaus’s last thought was not of death but of his mother.

And that he would see her again very soon.