

Chapter 4

July 2, 1919

The safe was large and cemented into the wall. Latvia's independence had brought with it an end to all residential restrictions for Jews and so Davidsons, like so many other affluent Jews, moved from the cramped apartments and filth of Riga's Moscow District to the expansive apartments of the city centre. But it was precisely the safe that ended up sealing the deal in his search for a new place to live. Its door and sides were substantial and had a layer of fireproof asbestos and thick steel plating. It had a two-part safety lock and a combination dial that could block the lock. Without the combination there was no way of opening it. This strongbox was built so well that its contents couldn't be damaged in a fire or even if the house collapsed.

The shelves divided the inside of the safe into three large, equal-sized partitions, while a fourth smaller compartment had its own lock.

Davidsons piled bundles of different types of bank notes onto the top shelf. The middle shelf was reserved for gold brooches, medallions, various kinds of pendants and diamond rings. Each of these had been placed on its own small black velvet cushion highlighting the exquisite quality of the jeweller's craftsmanship, along with the interplay of colours unique to each stone. The lower shelf contained a line of bags filled with more common items – silver and gold pocket watches, charms, cigarette cases, watch chains with pendants, watch chains without pendants and low-carat gold rings each inscribed with the words 'Never Forget' in German and Russian.

Before shipping out to the front, soldiers would spend their last money on gifts for their brides who mostly hailed from Riga's legions of cooks, chambermaids and factory girls. In return they were rewarded with chaste love and a flood of grateful tears of the sort that givers of more expensive gifts never received from finer, veiled ladies who would treat a gift of diamonds as if it were something ordinary and to be expected.

The few items designed by Davidsons himself were made to look like the classic designs in his albums. He understood that he wasn't a goldsmith or an artist, just a mediocre middleman. That was why long ago he followed Rahila's father's advice to focus more on jewellery sales rather than on design. He bought up strings of identical smooth wedding rings at a discount and simple rings from jewellers who didn't have shops of their own. Now and again he'd even order a special custom-made ring from them if he happened to buy the right kind of stone somewhere else, but on splitting it found that he couldn't make a nice pair of earrings.

Watches came from a manufacturer in Switzerland, necklaces were French factory productions, but bracelets and silver-coloured copper-nickel desk accessories were brought from Poland. Even if real masterpieces had shown up in his display case relatively often, their origin would surely be traced to St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev or Tbilisi. These items were sold by refugees who only recently had been wealthy people with their own mansions and factories, but were now fleeing the Reds, with only what they had on their backs and in their stomachs, through Lithuania and Latvia to Paris or even beyond. All of them needed money fast, since they hadn't yet come to terms with their newfound poverty and changed their old habits of staying in hotels, eating at restaurants and being waited on. Their valuables were their strategic reserve

and almost without fail they overvalued them. This was because they were estimating their worth based on the price they had paid or claimed to have paid for them. There was no shortage of unpleasant surprises – those who had given them these items as gifts had hoped, of course, that the recipients would never part with them and so their secret would stay hidden forever. And so one day a well-dressed, beautiful woman came into Davidsons' shop. She gave the humble, little room a bit of a dismissive, mocking glance, pulled up the sleeve of her squirrel fur coat and placed a well-groomed hand with a ring on it onto the glass display case in front of Mendels. The ring was adorned with a large, limpid stone belted with platinum in a splendid gold setting.

“Can you afford this?” the woman asked, smirking. From her appearance and temperamental behaviour, she might have been a famous St. Petersburg actress or opera prima donna.

“With your permission, madam, I'd like to examine it closer...”

“It's a Tomsk-Tomin piece, you've surely heard of this jeweller?” The lady lifted her hand and pressed the ring right up to Davidsons' face. The stone might have been twelve carats, maybe more.

Mendels nodded that he had, of course, heard of the famous jeweller and began to examine the stone with his loupe. Later on he was happy that he hadn't asked her to take off the ring so it would be easier for him to examine. The woman didn't have the slightest reason to make a fuss or accuse him of switching the stone for a different one.

Davidsons named a price and the woman started to laugh. It was slow and forced, as if she were standing on a stage.

“Do you know what you are?” the lady asked brightly, having recovered from laughing. “You’re a pitiful little cheat! Such a sweet little cheat, you poor little man...”

Davidsons calmly swallowed this insult and suggested that she show her ring to a different jeweller or someone at a pawnshop.

“Of course I’ll do that, my poor, pitiful little cheat, such a sad, little cheat!” And yet all the same a sense of alarm could be heard beginning to creep into her voice.

“Why do you think me a fool? Only a fool wouldn’t want to make a profit. The situation doesn’t allow you to ask too high a price, because you need money right away and by investing just a bit right now, I’d earn a nice profit later. But in this case I can only pay you for the setting. Yes, the stone is belted with platinum, and it’s been cut like a diamond, but it’s not a diamond in the sense that you think. Did you buy it from Tomsk-Tomin yourself?”

“It was given to me as a gift from someone. I don’t understand...”

“A real diamond is cut from an actual diamond, but this has been cut from a different mineral that goes by the noble-sounding name of a Cornish, Alaskan or Bohemian diamond. But in reality, this is quartz, which the people of the Alps usually call ‘mountain crystal’. It’s commonly found there, often in very large pieces.”

She sagged, seeming to age right before Davidsons’ eyes, and then collapsed as if from a heavy blow, the kind from which one can never recover.

“Scoundrel! My God what a scoundrel you are!” she whispered to someone who wasn’t there as she limped out of the shop door.

The ring must have been her only lifeline in the raging waters that had been kicked up by the revolutionary storm in which many thousands had already met their ends.

Davidsons felt no sorrow. If anything, he felt satisfaction. It was just like in 1915 when he'd heard that the Czar's generals were forming a second defensive front line in Jūrmala, on the isthmus between the sea and the River Lielupe, from the Dubulti railway station over to the seaside community of Majori, and had ordered two hundred of the area's stateliest villas be burned down. He associated them with an indelible feeling of humiliation and hatred against the 'upper crust' who didn't consider the poor as even being human.

The villas had two floors, with open and glass-enclosed verandas decorated with woodcarvings, and sat in the middle of lovely gardens tended by expert gardeners.

Father had walked from house to house selling small wares: string, needles, cheap kerchiefs and velvet ribbons that could be braided into one's hair, flea powder, yellow chalk for use against cockroaches and mousetraps. He had to walk with father in short trousers and bare feet, so that occasionally the cooks would take pity on this dirty little boy and pass him some goodie that was left over from the master's dinner table the previous day. If he walked all day, his stomach would be filled, but the humiliation clenched at his throat and drove tears into his eyes nevertheless.

Once inside the front gate, father would yell out the wares he had for sale in a loud voice. Mainly he was aiming for the attention of the servants. However, sometimes the windows of the top-floor bedroom would open and he would be greeted with angry, hateful swearing because he had woken up the owners so early.

They would throw at him whatever they had within arm's reach, and once even shot at them with a hunting rifle to scare them off. Mendels was so terrified that he developed a stutter, which didn't leave him for quite some time, yet father apologised bowing deeply and tried to turn it all into a funny joke. Davidsons could still clearly remember the pungent smell of the smoke from the powder, the man in the nightshirt at the window with a double-barreled shotgun and after the shot the sudden appearance of two messy-haired women's heads next to the man. They laughed. Oh, how they laughed! Father's apologies didn't help. Soon afterwards the police commissioner, claiming that he was taking action to combat local burglaries, forbade Jewish door-to-door salesmen from entering 'Dubulti Commune'. And so hunger gurgled in his stomach until father found a different district in Jūrmala from which he wasn't driven away by the other salesmen.

Mendels would definitely have grown up to be a fiery Socialist or fighter for equality if he hadn't married Rahila or, more correctly, if Rahila hadn't married him. Suddenly having become rich, he, of course, sought to secure his wealth – the same wealth that the Socialists clearly wanted to get their hands on. Nevertheless, his hatred of the 'upper crust', fueled by the humiliation he felt as a child, would never leave him. He looked on with satisfaction as a steady stream of crestfallen former barons, counts, princesses, governors' assistants and other high officials came into his shop to sell their last few valuables. Tails tucked between their legs, and stripped of their former pride and arrogance, these same people had ridden in gold-plated carriages in the Czarist years and had refused to sit in any horse-drawn cab that didn't have wheels lined with rubber.

It couldn't be said that Davidsons didn't have a knack for business. Revolutions and power shifts aside, there was still a demand for jewellery because in tumultuous times, when suddenly there were eight different currencies in simultaneous circulation, with nothing guaranteeing or setting their worth except for the order of a military governor or a decree from a government official, people first stuffed their socks full of gold and silver coins, which held their value the best, and afterwards attempted to get precious metals in exchange for currency. These circumstances permitted jewellers to set high prices. War profiteers came into Davidsons' shop with thick wads of notes and bought up whatever was more expensive. They came in already with the assumption that they would lose on their investment after the war, but recognised that if they held on to paper money they could lose everything in a day. Davidsons tried to get rid of notes just as quickly; however, he was in a better position as the owner of a jewellery shop. He had the advantage of being able to buy gold for low or even very low prices, as, since time immemorial, it had been standard practice for jewellers to not only sell, but also to improve, fashion, fix and buy.

In the last six months, Davidsons had expanded his services even further by loaning money in exchange for pawned gold. This was a good plan because individuals seeking to pawn their valuables were counting on buying back their possessions in the future, and so figured it would be easier to pull together a smaller amount of money. This was just self-deception – believing that tomorrow would be better than today. Nobody had yet come to buy back a single pawned item. They had either got used to living without the pawned family treasure or – even simpler – they didn't have anything with which to buy it back. Once when Mendels glanced at the

ledger where he recorded all his transactions, it was difficult to find any buyers among all those pawning their valuables – maybe one out of every ten, if that.

After taking the items out of the suitcase and bags, and arranging them on the shelves inside the safe, Davidsons placed his Nagant revolver on top of them and was just about to close the safe's door when he once again gave into temptation. He detached a small key from the charm of his pocket watch and unlocked the safe's fourth compartment.

It was long and narrow and ran the full length of the safe. To reach the far end, one had to stick in one's arm all the way up to the shoulder.

It was there that Mendels kept jewellery masterpieces that could only be properly appreciated by a high-level specialist. Every time he examined them, Davidsons wished that Rahila's deceased father was standing next to him. Her father had been the one who had introduced Mendels to the jewellery business after Rahila had decided to marry him and threatened her father by telling him she would run away from home if he didn't approve of her marriage. A powerful threat for a widower to hear from the mouth of his only child.

They came to Riga in the summer of 1895 from a major city in southern Russia where another pogrom was threatening to erupt. In truth, the threat of pogroms existed all across Russia. The reason for this was the tragedy that occurred on Nicholas II's coronation day. A large mass of wandering beggars and peasants from nearby villages had crowded into Moscow's Khodynka Field. Resembling a dark foreboding sky, they were hoping to catch a glimpse of Papa Czar. According to an ancient Russian custom, they were waiting there to receive gifts in the Czar's name. In an attempt to calm down the crowd, the confused Kremlin staff unfortunately

brought out some of the food reserves from the kitchen – a few barrels of sausages and cabbage. The result was that those at the back of the crowd started to push forward with such force that they knocked down and trampled those standing in front of them. Three thousand people lost their lives and the blame, for who knows what reason, was once again placed on the Jews and as a result the cry “Beat the Jews, save Russia!” rolled across the land.

Rahila’s father had already experienced other anti-Semitic pogroms and to live through another felt like too much. He hired an agent to sell his house and moved with his daughter to Riga where there had never been any.

“A jeweller has to be completely honest,” he taught Mendels, even before he showed him how to make molds, melt metals, cast and solder. “You’ll only have customers if they are completely convinced of your honesty. The fineness of silver and gold will be set by government officials, but the value of precious stones will rest on your own conscience. Sometimes the temptation will be very great. The truth is, no customer truly knows what he or she is buying, they can only guide themselves by the prices you set and your recommendations. Most can’t even distinguish polished pieces of glass from actual diamonds. All red stones are rubies to them, the green ones – emeralds, the violet ones – amethysts. When they are buying precious stones from an unfamiliar jeweller, they remind me of someone who doesn’t know how to swim and leaps off a cliff into the sea hoping the water will be shallow enough for them to be able to wade out again. If a customer could tell apart a yellow topaz from citrine, or yellow quartz, or a Scotch topaz from morion or smoky quartz, then they could be led around markets like a trained bear, shown for money and displayed as the eighth Wonder of the World.

“Incidentally, dark quartz is often called smoky topaz in the Urals, which is something that you should especially keep in mind, because in our trade we end up coming across these fairly often. Sometimes the similarity between stones is so great that the only way to tell them apart is to examine their mineral structure. But the difference in their price is enormous! When genuine rubies were being sold for six English pounds per carat, identical artificial rubies could be bought for five pence. And young people become tempted to sell one as the other. And if you’ve given into temptation once, who knows if you’ll ever be able to get on the right path again. Your appetite only increases the more you eat. You’ll devour more and more until...one day you’ll choke. And remember that lovely two-word names are usually the creation of manufacturers who mainly produce cheap goods: ‘Spanish topaz’, ‘Western topaz’, ‘Brazilian ruby’, ‘Siberian ruby’...Hearing the word ‘ruby’, the customer becomes confused and thinks that the stone is some special type of ruby when actually a ‘Siberian ruby’ is just tourmalin and a ‘Brazilian ruby’ is topaz. When a stone has a two-word name, then it’s time to close your ears and keep your eyes wide open! A jeweller is the same class of trusted professional as a family doctor.”

Back then Davidsons thought that he wouldn’t even be able to master the names of the main groups of precious stones: diamond, corundum, beryl, topaz, spinel, tourmalin, chrysolite, zircon, opal and on and on, to say nothing of the semiprecious stones, which numbered in the hundreds. His formal schooling had only lasted for a few winters. He knew how to read, but wrote with difficulty. Still, Rahila’s father’s efforts to teach him, and his own efforts to learn, bore fruit and Davidsons was convinced that as far as precious stones were concerned, he was one of the most knowledgeable jewellers in all of Riga.

Every stone in the safe's special fourth compartment had its own story, but it mostly seemed like these were of the owners' own creation, since they were all fairly similar. The high-born pointed to their forebears' romantic liaisons with princely families or the royal court. The merchant class told stories of successful purchases long ago somewhere in India, even though it was perfectly clear that the gemstone had come from Brazil and had been recently cut and polished in Amsterdam. The more mysterious the origin of a particular stone seemed, the longer and more difficult to believe was the story of its origins. And yet there was no shortage of exceptions.

One day during the months of Bolshevik rule, the jingle of the bell on the door announced the arrival of a soldier in a leather jacket who pulled a hefty suede pouch from under his arm and quietly poured its contents onto the counter. Shivers ran down Davidsons' back and a moment later it was covered with a cold sweat – this looked too much like some kind of a provocation. There were only a few gold items among its contents. It appeared that the owner hadn't wanted to carry gold with him because of its weight and so had broken the diamonds out of their gold settings, which he'd discarded. All of the stones were belted with platinum, which was to be expected for stones of this size. Only the occasional one was smaller than a carat. And yet among them all, a particular apple-green diamond stood out. It was similar to the Dresden Green Diamond for which Augusts Stiprais had paid seventy thousand thalers. It was clear to Mendels that he'd never have enough money to buy it. But it was also clear that he'd never get a second chance like this in his life. Maybe this diamond even had a name like the 'Star of the East', the 'Florentine', the 'Orlov' or the 'Pigot'. He had never wanted to get something so much in his life as this diamond – not for the money he'd make selling it, but so he could keep it for himself and be able to delight in it at

any moment his heart desired. The gemstone was hypnotising. His gaze was drawn back to it again and again.

A cabochon. The oldest diamond-polishing style of them all: smooth, one side curved, the other flat. It was believed that a cabochon could help with short-sightedness because the transparent stone formed a convex lens. Nero was said to have watched gladiatorial matches through one of these.

“Bloodstained.” The thought rushed through Davidsons’ mind as a warning. The appearance of the soldier and his demeanor seemed to confirm it. He shot an uncomfortable glance out of the shop window each time someone passed on the pavement outside. Jewellers weren’t superstitious, but if they had even the slightest suspicion that a stone has been obtained through the murder of its owner, they would never buy it because of the belief that it would bring them great misfortune.

“What do you think it’s worth?” Davidsons asked as nonchalantly as possible.

“You tell me!”

“Haja!”

Haja came out of the side room, gave the soldier a quick greeting and waited for her father to speak.

“Haja, I’ll need money. Go and get it! Rahila knows where the key to the safe is.”

“How long will it be?” The soldier was getting fidgety.

“Ten minutes, no more,” Haja answered instead of Mendels.

“Come in and sit down!”

The soldier immediately agreed. It seemed that he didn’t want a patrol or any other acquaintances to see him standing in the jewellery shop.

Davidsons gathered up the diamonds from the counter and brought them into the side room, pouring them out onto a dark green cloth that covered a small table directly under a powerful light – the jeweller’s workspace.

“How much?” Haja asked quietly as she walked by.

“All of it,” Davidsons answered and saw that Haja was so astonished that her eyes seemed to double in size.

The jeweller sat down at the table, turned on the light and, grasping each stone one after another with a pair of tweezers, gave each a lengthy examination with the loupe.

“I don’t keep much money in the shop,” Davidsons said to the soldier as if in passing. “Uncertain times, I’m afraid to keep too much around...”

Having selected six mid-sized stones the jeweller poured the rest back into the suede pouch.

“I’d take these. Forty-five thousand in Provisional Government notes.”

“How much does that come to in German marks?”

“By today’s exchange rate, almost one hundred and five thousand.”

“Nice-looking money,” the soldier rasped approvingly. “Nothing to add, nothing to take away... Really nice-looking money!”

It was a higher price than any other Riga jeweller would have offered the soldier. There was no way of ruling out that the seller hadn’t already gone to some other jewellery shops to gauge prices so that he could sell to the highest bidder.

“But these other ones, give them to the boys. A little something to play around with.” Davidsons tossed the pouch back to the soldier.

“And that big one?” the soldier asked anxiously. “I was told...”

“You were told that it’s a diamond? Green like an apple and flat as a board, but a diamond? Well, I don’t know...I don’t know...I’ve never seen any diamonds like that...And a hole drilled in the middle... And so shiny! I don’t know, I don’t know... Ask somebody smarter...” Davidsons laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I was told that the Czar himself probably had it fastened to his jumper or his hat... It was attached to a long, thick brass pin... The pin went through the hole. It was probably glued in, but it was easy to pull out... I yanked it a little bit harder and out it came... Just with my hands...”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t need this piece of shi...” Mendels stopped himself from fully saying ‘shit’ as if to not offend its owner. And then he continued his thought, just more politely, with other words, as if apologising. “Please don’t be offended, but it just doesn’t interest me, completely and utterly does not interest me...”

In the meantime, Haja had returned with the money. Davidsons put the six stones in a small case and slid it into his pocket. He put the bound bundles of currency onto the table. Then began a series of complex calculations, since there was only twenty thousand in Provisional Government notes. The rest had to be combined from Czarist rubles and German marks and ostrubles. Davidsons invited the soldier to participate in making the necessary conversions and insisted that he count every packet of cash he received. It took a good half-hour to finish it all.

“Come again some other time...” The jeweller extended his hand to the soldier. He looked completely crazed. Perhaps because of the giant sum of money now clenched under his arm, or because he had imagined the transaction completely differently with the conversation mainly focusing on the huge, green stone, which the jeweller had advised the soldier to give to the boys to play with.

The soldier had already turned to leave, when Davidsons said, “I wouldn’t give away that other rubbish completely for free... You might be able to get a thousand, maybe fifteen hundred for them. Jewellers won’t be interested in them, but I do know a man who makes little rings at home and takes them out to the countryside exchanging them for bacon and eggs.”

“Haja.” Davidsons stuck his head out the open door of the shop’s side room. “Haja, tell the man where Ribaks lives... After all, you once went to see him...”

“Back then I took a cab...To the right of Rumpmuiža Street there’s a kind of smallish wooden house...” Haja was a sharp girl and a good assistant. She understood right away the game Davidsons was playing. She didn’t know anybody named Ribaks, and had never seen or known where anyone like that lived. “But it’s not even necessary to go all the way out there. He’s promised to stop by in the evening for some soldering materials.”

“Are you free in the evening?” Davidsons asked the soldier, but before he could answer he added, “So that there’s not a lot of pointless walking, you can leave the pouch with me and I’ll show him... And tomorrow our shop will be open all day long...”

The most complicated purchase in Davidsons’ life ended even more successfully than he’d hoped. The soldier left the suede pouch with the remaining diamonds, but didn’t return to collect his money the next day. He also didn’t return the day after that, or a week later, or a month later. He disappeared without a trace. Remembering the jewellers’ superstition about bloodstained goods bringing certain misfortune, Davidsons became so anxious that he was afraid to even touch the suede pouch. So he stuck it at the very end of the safe’s small fourth compartment, even

though a good buyer had been found for the diamonds and he needed to at least sort them.

Haja tried to comfort her father telling him she didn't believe in superstitions or think that the soldier had necessarily been killed, and that it was equally likely he'd fled with his riches to Lithuania or Germany and was living the high life.

"He killed someone," Davidsons said with a great deal of certainty.

For a short moment he opened the door of the fourth compartment, then he locked it again and attached the small key to his watch's charm. The suede pouch remained untouched. Davidsons was afraid of it.

The green diamond was smaller than its twin from Dresden, smaller than the 'Hope' and the 'Nizam', but larger than the 'Cumberland' and the 'Star of the East'. It weighed thirty-nine metric carats and, as far as Davidsons was concerned, might perhaps be the hundredth largest diamond in the world.