

# Chapter One

— 1991 —



DARYA BORODINA SPIRIDOVA is startled awake by a persistent knock at her front door. Butterflies flutter against her skin, weave their way around her silver curls, rustle under the covers. A cloud of butterflies floats out of the bedroom and into the vestibule.

Draped in a shawl of fine satin, the cane of Tsar Nicholas II in one hand and an oil-burner in another, she quietly slips across the corridor of the crumbling Entertainment Palace to confront the massive oak door.

Little Servant appears, carrying a tray of piroshki and a tumbler of vodka. His smile reveals a mouthful of gold teeth that cost Darya a pearl-encrusted cross. “May I help, Madame?”

She raises one hand to keep him at bay. With the glint of mischief in his eyes and a habit of materializing at the most inconvenient times, the dwarf can be a nuisance. “This one is for *me*. I will answer.”

She tightens the shawl about her shoulder, her curls casting shadows in the dim light of the oil-burner as she tackles the many locks and bolts. The door heaves and clangs, then swings open with a great groan, and she comes face to face with a slit-eyed young man in a uniform the color of the Crimean shores.

“*Dobroye utro!*” He greets, bowing low, one hand touching the

brim of a fox-furred shapka tottering on his narrow, conelike head, the other offering a cream-colored vellum envelope.

At the sight of the Association's familiar seal on the envelope, her hand flies to the miniature Fabergé egg she wears on a chain around her neck. The Russian Nobility Association is a ragged assembly of leftover aristocrats, descendants of the Scherbatovs, Golitsyns, Bobrinskais, Yusupovs, and Sheremetevs. Before the motherless Bolsheviks destroyed Russia, these aristocrats would roll their shiny carriages along the Nevsky Prospekt on the way to the Mariinsky Theater or from one palace or another, where, cuddled in furs and dazzling in jewelry, they would spoon pearly Caspian caviar and click champagne flutes with their Imperial Highnesses, Tsar Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov and Alexandra Feodorovna. They communicated in French with their children and Swiss governesses, in English with their nannies and British friends, and in Russian with their servants.

These exiled aristocrats still dream, plan, and plot to reinstate the monarchy, although they dismiss her own search for the Tsarevich, Alexei, as a mad woman's last delusion.

"*Spasiba*, son." Darya murmurs her thanks to the ruddy-faced messenger. She steps back to shut the door, but the boy remains rooted at the threshold, enthralled by the 104-year-old woman with mesmerizing eyes, one an orb of cracked opal. Not the type of milky opal mined from the crevices of the earth, but a lucid golden shade, defiant and full of mystery.

"You are so beautiful, so different!" He hears himself blurt out, his tongue tripping over itself. "Is it true that your opal eye can read the thoughts of animals?"

Darya aims her cracked gaze directly at him. "Humans too, *Golubchik*, my dear fellow. I see everything, even what I'd rather not." At her age, she has learned to accept many things...accept the crack in the opal that was caused by long-ago grief, a tragedy witnessed, a black stain that should never have happened. She has learned to accept the curiosity her eye stirs, accept that her beauty,

unmarred by time or misfortune, is an oddity too. So, despite her impatience to learn what the envelope holds, she decides to answer the courageous boy, who reminds her of Little Servant twenty years before, when he appeared at her door with a mouthful of bad teeth and two fat-nosed civets in his arms, claiming his parents had been exiled to "the camps." He said he did not care that everyone thought she was a sorceress and her butterflies were Romanov spirits. In truth, he said, her eccentricities suited him well, since he was different too. He promised to work hard in return for food and shelter and claimed that his wild cats were trained to pluck red coffee cherries from bushes he promised to plant in her garden, cherries that would yield the most aromatic coffee. She had simply opened the door and let him in. And now, despite his penchant for lighting the fireplaces in her absence, his lengthy silences and the excellent vodka he distills have become agreeable additions to her solitary life.

She rubs the envelope between her palms and offers the uniformed young man a smile that reveals her own impeccable teeth. "Would you like a bottle of my homemade vodka?"

He shuffles in place, uncertain of the right protocol, whether to accept or politely refuse. Deciding on the safest course, he replies, "I don't drink, *spasiba*."

She lets out a rare laugh that originates in her bowels and bursts out into a volcanic mirth. "What a pity! A daily shot of good vodka keeps you healthy. But I understand, boychick, I really do. You are young, untouched by tragedies, drunk on life. Still, if you change your mind, you are welcome to a bottle of my excellent vodka."

"Is vodka the reason you look so young... Pardon me. They say you are old, but you don't look old at all. *Are you old?*"

"Old! Wash your mouth, boy." She cocks her head at him, searches his eyes for some evidence of malice or derision, and finding only the innocence of youth, she adds, "The secrets to my long life are my passions, obsessions, and dreams that have not changed one bit since I was seventeen, living in the Belovezh Forest with birds of

paradise and wild animals. If anything, I am more driven today. Go, now, and share this with your young friends.”

There is more to the secret of her longevity, of course. A chunk of ambergris she discovered on the Crimean shores remains essential to her youthful appearance. And her optimism, this ability to sustain herself on hope and a diet of memories, helps too. Even when the mix of memory and guilt will not be assuaged by the hallucinatory berries in her garden, she refuses to lose hope. Hope that the Tsarevich survived the horror of that long-ago night and, despite his age, remains in good health. Hope that she will, once more, hold him in her arms and cover his face with a million tender kisses.

“May I ask another question?” the boy says.

“*Ne budet-li*, be careful what you ask, young man,” she replies, a puff of butterflies huddling in her cupped hand.

“Is it true that you were Tyotia Dasha of the Tsarevich, Alexei Nikolaevich Romanov?”

“The answer is yes. *Da!* I was his lady-in-waiting, his beloved auntie Dasha. Now, go! *Schast’ya i zdorov’ya!* Good luck! And remember our Tsarevich in your prayers,” she replies, a cloud of butterflies fluttering around her like ornaments.

Finding her less intimidating than he was led to believe, the boy exclaims, “People say you are a sorceress and these butterflies are Romanov spirits that keep your enemies away and help you...”

“You talk too much, son. Close your mouth or you’ll start burping fat toads.” She gives him a gentle push with her cane and shuts the door behind him. She waves away two insistent butterflies that land on the envelope and snaps the cane at a rat that scurries across the hallway to peck at her heel. Other rats come and go, content with meager leftovers. This beady-eyed one is as greedy as every revolutionary Red that crossed her path, every bastard communist and worm-eating antimonarchist who soils his pants at the sight of her.

She breaks the seal on the envelope and pulls out a vellum note.

Her heart loud in her chest, her gaze skips over the gold-embossed inscriptions. Emissaries of the Russian Nobility Association summon her to an emergency meeting at Rostislav Perfumery. Four in the afternoon, sharp. An important matter requires her immediate attention. What could have prompted this tight circle of monarchists to summon her *now*? She kept an eye on them through the years, following their pathetic failures to find the heir to the throne, her precious charge, her sweet Alyosha, the man who would restore the monarchy. Year after year, one or another pretender to the throne materialized, crooks and impostors with no ties to the Romanovs, not a drop of royal blood in their dry veins.

She folds the note, reflecting upon her own continuous quest around the polluted Ekaterinburg streets, the traffic-choked boulevards, soot-covered buildings, and stinking buses to scrutinize anyone who might bear a remote resemblance to her Tsarevich, her adorable prince, with melancholy eyes that reflected his suffering. She continues to travel around the country to listen to whoever might claim to have information about a Romanov, meet with one impostor after another, inspect the geography of their faces, and heap ash on their lying heads.

Little Servant reappears with his tray. “Your breakfast, Madame?”

She slips the note back in the envelope and frees a butterfly that found its way in. “Not today.”

“Important news, Madame?”

“Yes, yes, an important meeting I need to attend.”

“Right now, Madame?”

“No, in an eternity. Well, not quite, but so it seems. I will have to be at the perfumery in four hours.”

“Perhaps Madame would like me to warm up the banya? That always helps.”

“Yes, thank you. Please do.” She will bathe, shampoo her hair, and enjoy a hallucinatory berry or two, a tumbler of scented vodka to pass the time. She likes the sense of lightness that every immersion in the banya brings. Bathing is a necessary ritual, her daily

conduit to the past, all the way back to her childhood and her beloved parents.

The dwarf hastens to prepare the banya, intent on pleasing his mistress who, unlike others, regards him as an equal rather than a stepped-on cockroach to be swept up with the trash. As long as he can remember, he has been addressed as Little Servant, despite the fact that, apart from his height, the rest of his features are quite large: protruding eyes, hooked nose, shovel-like hands and feet. He likes living here, safe from curious stares, where he can dress as he pleases, in loose, colorful satin pants and shirts that remind him of Backschai village, where he came from. His room, despite the flaking paint and smell of mildew, is opulent by his standards, and he likes to occupy a bed that once belonged to the Grand Duchess Anastasia. He shuffles into the garden with its patch of berries, giddy butterflies, wild civets, and the vodka distillery where he ferments black figs, molasses, cumin, and currants. And he walks the same path the Tsar and Tsarina had walked seventy years before.

Set in the center of five acres of land, perched on a hill overlooking the city below, the Entertainment Palace is where Nicholas II and Alexandra Feodorovna held symphonies and ballets after a long day of formal responsibilities. Once surrounded by groves of birch, linden, and cedar, the landscape now chokes with robusta and hybrid arabustra bushes Little Servant planted when he came here with his wild civets.

The civets continue to breed and multiply. They creep among the bushes at night and pluck coffee cherries, chew off the fruity exterior, and swallow the hard innards. Every morning, Little Servant steps out into the garden and separates, from the many clumps of civet dung, the beans that have been refined by the civets' gastric juices. Then he embarks on brewing the rarest of sweet coffees with the aroma of vanilla and chocolate.

This miraculously preserved backdrop that masks the ruins of the Bolshevik Revolution and years of civil war is the only imperial residence the communists and antimonarchists did not

confiscate, for fear of the multiplying butterflies they regarded as the lingering spirits of the Romanovs.

Little Servant steps into the banya, a bathhouse built decades ago that, apart from the missing roof, remains in acceptable condition. Testing the water and finding it warm and pleasant, he stirs in a generous amount of essence of eucalyptus and orange blossom, stacks towels, and places a jar of scrubbing salts and birch whips close by. He picks five hallucinatory berries from the garden and arranges them on a decorative fig leaf in a bowl. He goes to fetch his mistress.

"The banya is ready, Madame," he formally announces.

She emerges, tossing her shawl behind and stepping out of her nightgown as Little Servant picks them up and folds them carefully on his arm. He observes her immerse herself in the aromatic water, admiring the miracle that she is. Her muscles are firm, her skin the shade of cloves of cinnamon, her golden eyes reflecting the splendor of a woman who is secure in her beauty. He never tires of searching the Entertainment Palace for something that might explain the secret of her eternal youth: an elixir, an incantation, a magical herb. Perhaps something that might add a few centimeters to his height.

He has wondered more than once whether the secret of her youth might be related to the fragrance emanating from the ever-present miniature Fabergé egg slung from a gold chain around her neck. It is a superb piece of jewelry, no larger than his thumbnail. Deep green enamel dotted with brilliant diamonds and pearls in the center of which is the likeness of a beautiful red-haired woman. When snapped open, its bold, inebriating scent is like a lover's playful slap.

Little Servant restrains Darya's hair with a scarf and adjusts a pillow behind her head. He fetches the bowl of berries. She drops two plump, shiny ones in her mouth, sucks the nectar, savors the familiar bitter-tart taste. She calls out to Little Servant to bring back the bowl of berries he is carrying away.

“Be careful, Madame, freshly picked off the vine and quite potent.”

“So much the better,” she replies, plucking an obstinate butterfly from the bowl and collecting the rest of the berries, enough to keep her excitement at bay until the meeting this afternoon.

Darya rests her head on the pillow, sighs contentedly, and shuts her eyes to imagine a time 104 years ago, a time before her birth, a time when aurochs roamed wild in the Belovezh Forest and Sabrina was a woman free of care.