

The Shadow of Lillya

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The wind of heaven is that which blows between a horse's ears.

Arabic Proverb

Prologue

Lillya shut her eyes and squeezed them tight. She imagined every muscle and limb of her father's favorite black stallion, and like she did as a young girl, took off like Pegasus flying. The faster the horse went, the clearer her past became, until it was as real as the struggles of her days. The planets parted, the stars scattered, and a trail of her memories was left in the shadow.

Chapter 1

The Winter Palace, Petrograd, January 1917

The sparkle from the jewels sewn into the gowns, draped around necks, and held in place by bezels on the tiaras of the courtly ladies' heads was almost blinding. Giant crystal chandeliers swayed to the beat of the music, while six-foot-tall marble vases filled with leaves of palm the size of an African elephant's ear stood guard, eavesdropping on every conversation. A drunken frenzy inspired the orchestra, and they played faster and faster. The loose limbs of the dancers on the ballroom floor looked like trees during a hurricane, swaying up and down, gyrating in circles; then shaking like dogs just pulled out of a pool of frozen water, the ladies and gentlemen smiled with great satisfaction.

A count poured a pitcher of drink down the front of a duchess' finely stitched dress and then without any sort of inhibition he started to lick it. Soon he was under her dress. She unfolded her fan as though she were blushing in mock embarrassment. Then he popped his head out, seemingly quite content with himself, and yelled to the crowd, "Do you know what secret I found under there?"

The crowd shouted back, "No!"

The count smiled, then winked and said, “The Empress doesn’t go to the hospital to help the soldiers. She goes because the Tsar no longer satisfies her. She’s taken on a lover. I hear it’s one of the doctors, but who? Who could it be?” He said again as if to challenge them. Then he grabbed the drunk duchess’ hand and started dancing once again, knowing he had left one word on the lips of all in attendance, “Who?”

“We don’t have to stay, my dear,” Anton whispered in Lillya’s ear.
“We’ve shown ourselves; we can go now.”

Curious as to the goings-on at court and the latest rumors being spread, Lillya Xenia Englehardt Vronsky was not quite as anxious as her husband to depart. “Dance with me,” she said. “You know everyone loves to watch your graceful movements. “You are the best dancer in this ballroom,” Lillya told her husband. “Besides we need to stay informed, now more than ever,” she smiled through her teeth. She knew he knew she was right, but she was also aware he had no stomach for such affairs. It pained him to watch men and women he had once respected throw away their dignity so easily as if it were an old scrap of food and simple to replace. However, Lillya knew Anton Vronsky would not refuse her.

This past year Russia and St. Petersburg have been fighting for their lives. *Millions of soldiers and peasants have died*, Lillya thought to herself, *and all the upper class can think about is overindulgence, intrigue and lies.*

As if he were able to read her thoughts, Anton whispered, “When they count their money and jewels tomorrow, I hope they tuck some of it away.”

“One of these days the tables could turn and where will they all be then?”

Anton did not say this to scare her. He simply wanted her to have a more realistic idea of how the people outside of their class felt. What was their level of aggravation and frustration and underneath that, anger? He had a unique perspective, that of a common man. who had been brought into the folds of high society. With one eye he read the minds of the aristocrats and with his other eye the thoughts of the people who came to his circus and the vendors from whom he bought food and trinkets almost every day on the street.

Anton Vronsky was born the heir to the most famous Russian family circus having come from a long line of high-wire walkers like his father, Dmitri. Every day of his life from boyhood to the day he turned the circus over to his own son, Vladimir, Anton mixed with and worked with the people who filled his family’s bleachers. His circus made the crowds laugh and scream. Yes, Anton felt certain he had a broader view of the temperature

of the world and such matters. He had been born into the upper class but could still see the world through the people. With that in mind years earlier, before the 1905 revolution and before he turned gray, Anton and Lillya passed on their legacy, the Vronsky Family Circus, to their son Vladimir who now lived in America with his wife and four daughters. For this, Anton was glad, for he knew they were safe. Now, he had to focus on his wife and that was enough.

The palace, Lillya noted, had recently adopted a frugal existence. Still, the message they were trying to send seemed to have little to no effect on the upper class, nor did it dictate their actions. The aristocrats, simply put, did not want to see, feel, or accept the rage and growing anger of the people just outside the palace doors or in the streets where they shopped, or in front of their homes. Even though they could see a dark cloud was rising above them, they continued to spend enormous sums of money frivolously while the population was feeling the pangs of war and hunger, and the ball was just one example.

Chapter 2

Yuri Engelhardt's Townhouse, St. Petersburg, June 1877

“It’s mine,” Natasha said, and she grabbed the necklace right out of Lillya’s hand.

“You know that’s not true. It was a gift from the Tsarina herself. That’s what my grandmother told me.” However, Lillya’s grandmother was really a great aunt who thought her sickly younger sister’s daughter would need one and it was a role she had been training for her entire life. However the old woman had procured the present, it didn’t matter. Lillya didn’t see her grandmother often; she lived in Moscow and traveled to Europe frequently with her husband from whom she had inherited her title and royalty. Nonetheless, Lillya was sentimental about the old woman, more so than most.

“It’s only because your mother is sick and the old one and I are your only true friends.” For a second Natasha felt bad for saying something so hurtful, but Lillya took Natasha’s guilt and used it against her and in this moment of weakness she tackled Natasha and pinned her down on the floor. After a few minutes they both got tired, and Natasha gave up.

“Okay, here it is.” Laughing, she handed Lillya the simple heart-shaped ruby necklace. Remembering her place, she lifted Lillya’s long,

wavy hair and spun it into a bun on the top of her head, then added a deep red rose from the garden that was conveniently in a vase nearby. Finally, she locked the clasp of the necklace and let it fall down Lillya's front where it rested just above her chest.

"Now turn around so I can see how it shines almost as brightly as your eyes. But it's not nearly as beautiful as you," said Natasha. Lillya just smiled. She was used to these sorts of easy compliments from Natasha.

A maid walked through the door. "Will you please prepare a bath for Lillya?" Natasha asked. Then she watched and waited until the bathwater was poured, the maid knew that Natasha had almost full authority to ask for whatever she liked when it came to Lillya. The maid delicately removed Lillya's clothes and helped her slip into the tub.

Lillya admired Natasha's composure and self-assuredness. She never brought up money or that by social class she was far above Natasha's station, for she liked and respected her too much to do something so cruel. They had grown up together. Natasha was more like a sister than anything else. Lillya couldn't remember a time when she didn't know Natasha. As far as she was concerned, they had shared almost everything since birth. Still, as they grew older, their difference in stature and how society would judge

them would become more apparent, for Natasha would remain the server and Lillya the receiver.

Sometimes Natasha, as much as she loved Lillya, couldn't stop herself from getting a bit fed up with her situation, and she would find herself becoming a bit manipulative. Natasha would search for a way to turn the tables and on more than one occasion, she almost had Lillya convinced that by being poor, Natasha was the wealthy one. Like the beautiful summer day when Lillya's father Yuri took Natasha shopping. Though she knew almost everything that they would buy together would ultimately end up on Lillya, Natasha recognized that Lillya would see it as a way for Natasha to spend more time with her father, garnering his attention and praise. Being the same size as Lillya worked for and against each of them depending upon their mood and generosity of spirit. Realizing their similarities, when Yuri wanted to buy something special for Lillya and he wanted to pick it out himself, he would arrange for Natasha to have the day off. This way he wouldn't have to interrupt Lillya's studies and Natasha got to spend an entire day by herself with Lillya's father. If he bought Lillya a new blouse, he purchased a smart-looking scarf for Natasha along with a lovely belt so they each got to show off something special. But for Natasha, the best gift she received on her days spent with Yuri was the silent permission he gave her to converse freely,

show off her intelligence, wit and humor, and every smile that Yuri gave her in return was more than enough reward for her. If she had been rich, she would have been stuck at home like Lillya with the tutor, memorizing her lessons instead of spending the day with the best seamstress in all of St. Petersburg.

Natasha was beautiful like Lillya, and they shared a similar slant of nose and a distinct dimple on their chins. Both girls could not believe their luck to be so similar in both spirit and looks. They were close in age and often pretended they were twins. Natasha was skilled like Lillya, but in different ways. She had a photographic memory and could remember everything Lillya had ever read to her, every classic, every poem. She could recite what she had heard almost word for word. She excelled in history and even learned to speak French just by sitting next to Lillya during her lessons. French, the language of the aristocracy, slipped off her tongue easier than it did her patron's. Yuri's Greek and Latin grammar books tempted her to read Homer and the Roman poets in their ancient forms.

Still, Natasha worshipped Lillya and taking care of Lillya and being her friend became Natasha's *raison d'être* and how she got rewarded. Most of the time she felt privileged to have been given such an important job. It made her feel a step above the other maids, and she was.

Lillya's father Yuri was a tall handsome man with prematurely gray wavy hair and a mustache. This made him stand out from across a room and look very regal and distinguished. He had almond-colored eyes that in a certain light looked green, but not nearly as green as his daughter's. His eyes in the dark looked like cat eyes with candles lit behind them. However, what made him special to Natasha was his ability to see what was special about her, and the way he quietly encouraged her by allowing her to sit in on Lillya's tutoring sessions and make certain she was not disturbed. Lillya could have objected, but she enjoyed the company and later she had someone to discuss that day's lesson with who could remember it word for word.

Lillya stood up in the tub. The maid was waiting with a towel to dry her off and prepare her for evening supper. She undid her bun, took out the flower Natasha had put in her hair and shook her big mane. It was almost as thick as a horse's tail. Droplets splattered across the room, leaving pools of water on the floor.

Chapter 3

Yuri Englehardt's estate outside Petrograd, February 1918

Lillya and Anton lived with Lillya's father, Yuri, on a large estate south of St. Petersburg, west of the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoye Selo, the Tsar's Village.

The Englehardt's main house had Frankish influences with a nearby manor house and a chapel. Tree-lined lanes, corrals and lush open fields allowed Lillya and Anton ample space to ride. There were fruit and vegetable greenhouses and a flower garden.

It seemed a natural fit. Yuri loved good alcohol, fine food and horses. He valued athleticism and people who did the best that they could at whatever it was that sparked their passion. He had enjoyed watching his young grandson Vladimir, as he learned all the feats and skills he would need to lead the family's circus, his destiny. Sometimes, this made Yuri wonder what they really thought about his estate and all that had come with it by birth. But he genuinely enjoyed the world that his daughter had become a part of, and on afternoons when he had nothing else to do, he would visit the Vronsky Family Circus, sit in the bleachers, and watch the dancing bears and elephants and tigers all learn new tricks, and he was fascinated. "It takes so much more than skill," he said to his daughter Lillya. "It would take me a

lifetime of learning patience to do what they do. I so admire the talents your son is inheriting.”

In later years, long after Lillya and Anton stitched a life together, as much as Yuri had enjoyed Anton’s circus, Anton surprised himself by adjusting to a life of leisure so easily.

Sometimes, though, Lillya acknowledged that the world around her was crumbling, especially in regard to Russia, her home country, the country she loved with all her heart. The revolution had begun last February with the strikes and food shortages, followed by demonstrations and finally the unthinkable - the mutiny of the Imperial Guard.

It wasn’t long before news began to trickle in about the arrests of friends, other wealthy aristocrats, some, who just like Lillya and Anton, had attended the ball a year past. The uncertainty of her future began to haunt her, and she found herself staying up late into the night trying to wash the nightmares away. She remembered each one and could repeat them at will with detail like fine needlework. She began to sew them together. In her nightmare, she saw a garbage cart and an old man who picked up what was left behind and would soon pass it on to a peasant who was poorer than himself. Fear ran through her body like nerves out of control. She found herself face down in mud, unable to come up for air and she thought she

would drown. Then a man with a familiar demeanor wrapped his arms around her and told her not to worry because he would save her. Then she would wake up gasping for breath. But who was he and why would he save her?

Which army would eventually come to get them? Would it be the Reds or the Whites that would ultimately come and take them away? She tried to keep her immense fear to herself and would remind herself that fear only breeds more fear. Though news continued to find its way to their door, none of it was good.

The Reds wasted no time in seizing power and property from the wealthy. Every few days someone they knew vanished, and soon Lillya and Anton were forced to face the truth. “St. Petersburg, or should I say Petrograd has gotten too dangerous for people like us,” Anton finally told his wife. “We can’t hold off any longer.”

Lillya was in agreement. Anton was sympathetic to the plight of the common people, but he was driven most of all by his duty to protect her and their family. Many of Lillya and Anton’s aristocratic friends were forced at gunpoint to clean toilets or dig graves while some had simply disappeared. Had they been captured, or had they escaped?

Lillya's family was very high up the aristocratic ladder, but they were all well-liked in the community and they each had a special talent that could not be replicated. But she knew, in her heart, that had she not been married to Anton she would have met a horrible fate.

Weeks before their departure, her father and Anton planned the best method and route of escape from St. Petersburg, the one least likely to have them identified and detained. Of course, travel by sea, rail or motorized vehicle was out of the question. Their only option was by horse.

"It's good that you could see so far ahead, Yuri," Anton said after Yuri reviewed his idea of sending Lillya and Anton off to their cousin Michael in distant Perm province due to the unspoken favors Michael owed him. "He's a good man, but one needs a little more than goodness during these times to get someone to risk their life."

So, it was decided and Lillya had her own reasons to follow suit. Besides her father, Anton loved her more than anyone and both would give their own lives to save her, so she had no reason not to trust their plan.

Until that day, though, Lillya decided to appreciate every minute and every pleasure that she had been afforded during her life; besides, riding her favorite stallion to take her mind off what was about to happen seemed like a smart thing to do.

“Am I grayer than I was last week?” she asked her husband. They all seemed to grow older in that short period of time, more than she had imagined possible. As they came up with the details of their plan, it slowly dawned on Lillya that her father would stay behind, but what could he do to protect himself and their beloved home when the Bolsheviks came to seize them?

Chapter 4

Yuri's estate, June 1880

Lillya Xenia Akinsya Engelhardt was born to a family of great attention. Peter the Great granted her ancestors property and serfs in 1714 as reward for their service in the war against Sweden that won for Russia the swamp land St. Petersburg was built upon. Her father Yuri inherited some of the family land and turned it into a very lucrative estate; producing grains, collecting horses for breeding and a wine cellar that captured the imagination of the most avid collectors. He married her mother Angelika when she was only 17 and he 20, long before anyone, even Angelika, had any inkling of her being sick.

Lillya's mother had been ill as long as Lillya could remember, though once in a while the doctors would let her come home. When they did, everyone would be on pins and needles waiting for the moment the symptoms of her anxiety would begin again. She would shake and sweat just a little bit and that would last for several days. The nurses would wipe her brow and try to keep her comfortable and calm her down with smelling salts and herbs. By the fourth night they would wrap her tightly in a blanket to keep her arms pinned so she couldn't hurt herself. Lillya would toss and turn on those nights. She would sing herself to sleep focusing on the heart-shaped

mole on her back while trying to think of happy songs, praying they would bring about a good outcome. Natasha waited until she could stand it no more. They were both aware of what would happen next. Natasha would pull her covers down and quietly make her way to Lillya's bed, Lillya would open her blanket and let Natasha in and in the morning they would awake with their arms wrapped around the other.

Lillya's mother, Angelika, wouldn't shout or cry, even though sometimes they wrapped her so tightly she could barely breathe. Where she was going would be more comfortable for her and bring her one step closer to her life's purpose; to be god's messenger as was written in her name, but Lillya kept on wondering, messenger of what?

In the middle of the night, Natasha and Lillya would hear the carriage wheels approaching and the clop, clop of the horses' hoofs as they got nearer. It was impossible to interpret the commotion that was taking place, the low humming mumbles of her father's and the doctors' voices. A groggy reply from her mother, who earlier had been given something they called opium. Lillya only knew that it was strong and made her mother agreeable and sleepy. Angelika's doctor, through his mustache and beard, would explain to her father what he already knew. They would be taking her to the

spa in Odessa where she could rest, and hopefully get better and one day return to the family for good.

The entire process usually only took two or three months. At first everything would be wonderful, and Lillya would get very excited and almost believe she might have a mother. But even by the age of five or six, the more it happened, and it did, again and again, Lillya began to recognize the signs. She could read her mother's body language.

The headaches would start, then she would join the family only for lunch, then she would lock herself in her room for the rest of the day. Soon she wouldn't retreat from her bedroom at all, nor receive any visitors, including Lillya. Then, almost like clockwork, the sweating and shaking would begin and the following day Natasha would hand Lillya a note when she opened her eyes, but the flowers next to her bed told Lillya all that the note would say. Natasha stood ready with Lillya's robe and slippers and together they would enter her mother's bedroom. The bed would be made as if no one had ever been there, and Lillya would defend her mother's actions by repeating to Natasha what she had heard all her life: her mother Angelika had a special job and she was off being a messenger for God, and then Lillya would think, for what? For whom?

Lillya would ask her Grandmama, when she saw her and they were alone, where her mother had really gone. Grandmama would say, “She’s with the doctors back at the hospital trying to get better for you.” At least that was a partial truth. But then one morning her Grandmama came to their house dressed head to toe in black. Lillya did not have to ask. Her father, not grasping Lillya’s comprehension of the situation, told her that her mother decided to visit God during the night and she found it so peaceful and delightful that she missed the one train back home. Flowers came and filled the house and Lillya laid some on her mother’s grave as she stood bravely next to her father with Natasha holding her hand. Later her Grandmama handed her a note. I found this in your mother’s room. It simply said, “Tell my daughter to have a good life. We will see each other again when the angels call for her many years from now.” Years later Lillya waited for her mother in the dark, but she never came.

To take out her frustration Lillya rode. Every day she took out one of her father’s horses and she rode them hard, and day by day she honed her talent. The family trainer had once tried to teach her, but Lillya ignored him, instead she walked among the horses in the corral, waiting for the curious to approach her. Then she would speak softly to them, and they would let her climb aboard, unsaddled, and she mastered them like a Mongol or a Cossack

child. She soon earned a reputation as a daring horsewoman. Her father closed his eyes as his young daughter practiced gymnastics on her horse.

Natasha's mother, Sonya Palitov, was a housekeeper at a nearby estate. They moved to St. Petersburg from Perm when Natasha was barely four. She visited her mother every Sunday. A woman would come from the estate and would dress her in the clothes that Yuri's personal maid laid out for her, but when she arrived where her mother worked, no matter how beautifully she was dressed, she would be sent to the back door where her mother would greet her. She had been instructed to never enter the main entrance.

Although she loved her mother, it became her least favorite day of the week, except for one thing, Natasha had something that Lillya did not, a mother.

Natasha, too, had some questions left unanswered, like "Who is my father and why was my beautiful, wonderful mother born into the station of a servant?"

Natasha tried not to think too much about what the future would bring. She believed she was living her best life now, and Lillya was

unwilling to admit that eventually they would be forced by society to go their separate ways and develop separate lives.

Yuri's Townhouse, March 1881

Yuri came into Lillya's bedroom to awaken her himself. He had been crying and she had not seen him look like this since her mother died. He sat on the edge of her bed to deliver sad news. Tsar Alexander II had been assassinated in his carriage by a terrorist with a bomb. The streets of St. Petersburg were by now filled with soldiers and police. It was not a time to go out playing. They would stay in their home until announcements were made about the funeral and the succession.

At some point they would be called upon to participate but for now they needed to stay inside to pray for Russia and grieve for the Tsar and his family. The servants went about their duties without cheer or smiles. Natasha came to Lillya's room and immediately hugged her.

In the days that followed, Yuri and Lillya looked at photographs that had been taken of him with the Tsar including one that included her mother and herself as a very small child.

The day of the funeral, Lillya was dressed in black and ready to leave with her family but because this all reminded her too much of her mother's

funeral, she could not stop weeping and it was decided that she should stay at home. She refused to remove her black dress and wanted to spend the day reading and singing songs with Natasha. Every funeral reminded her of her mother's funeral, and they were unbearable for her. Just dressing up in black gave her chills and she wouldn't keep a black dress in her closets.

But before the carriages departed, Natasha urgently prevailed upon her to get over her fears and attend to give comfort to her her childhood playmate, Nicki the new Tsarevitch who was himself only thirteen. At the gravesite, Nicki saw how tearful she was and hugged her, telling her and her family that she could be excused from the remainder of the service. He was grateful for her attendance, and she had given him courage to stay because he wanted to do exactly what she was doing. Her governess was then instructed to take Lillya away to wait in the carriage.

Chapter 5

Yuri's estate, March 1918

"I insist! Our old workhorse, Sophie, is exactly the kind of horse I will need, and she won't attract attention. Sophie and Timur are my choices and Anton can choose a horse to pull our cart. That's enough. Any more and we'll have thieves outside our campfire waiting for the fire to grow dim so they can jump in and take what is ours."

They had been planning this for weeks and after a while her handsome, proud husband grew into the man that would do whatever he had to do to save her life. Yuri and Anton poured over maps, deciding upon a southern route through Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan and then continuing eastward to reach Kungur. This route passed near larger towns and provided opportunities for rest and resupply. They would have the cart loaded with plenty of beets, potatoes, borscht and dried meats that they could eat along the way as well as a few cases of lower grade vodka to drink or barter – Yuri's best vodka would only arouse suspicion about who they were and how they got it.

Up to this point the soldiers, both Red and White, had let them be. But they knew it wouldn't last forever. After all, the Englehardt's and the Vronsky's had been very well known in St. Petersburg. Lillya had been a

notorious horsewoman, and she'd married the famous tightrope walker Anton who had inherited his family's circus.

It had been hard enough letting go of her son and never getting to meet his wife and family. "Now must we give up our home and my father, too?" she asked Anton the night before they left but she knew they had no choice.

They would have to look like different people. Lillya's hair, that had always been neatly coiffed and folded close to her head, she unpinned and wore long and wild as she had as a girl. Anton grew his hair long too and wore a beard down to his chest and covered half of his head with a farmer's hat.

In her satchel, she carried a letter from Anton mailed to a fictitious person named Borkovic to use as an alternate form of identity.

Better to think good thoughts, Lillya observed, and pulling herself back into the present, she took out a simple scarf Natasha had given to her as a birthday present.

The day of their parting came like any other. The sun rose, they ate their breakfast together and joked as if they would be doing the same tomorrow. But as the hour of their departure neared, their emotions began to take over.

Lillya heard her father searching through his favorite room. “Not this one,” and he broke the bottle. She knew better than to join him at this moment. He had a right to release his feelings in private. Then minutes later she heard her father express a very satisfied, “Yes.” She quickly moved away from the door. She didn’t want her father to know she had been listening.

“We’re going to have a little something before I send you off,” he said when he climbed back up the stairs. “Can’t let you go without warming you up a bit first. Tell that husband of yours to come inside.”

When Lillya and Anton entered her father’s study, he was opening an ungodly expensive bottle of Massandra Sherry that had once been a part of the Tsar’s wine collection. Uncorking it like the expert he was, he poured three glasses. He refused to make a toast, for there would be no solemn goodbye, instead he lit his pipe and sat back in his old leather chair enjoying the smell of his tobacco while he made a gurgling sound imploring his tongue to fall into place and his lungs to pull in just the right amount of air to kidnap the scent of the wine’s bouquet before taking a full sip. Without saying a word, they were all aware of the placement of the sun. They would depart just before sunset, the time of least recognition.

Anton went outside to check on the horses. Lillya had passed on the stallion and her favorite mare and told her solid Orlov Trotters that they would soon be leading the way. She was about to kiss her father when he touched her shoulder and stopped her. “I have something to give you, Lillya. I should have done this years ago, but I didn’t have the courage. It’s wrapped in a small, ordinary maid’s towel so if a thief approaches you, they’ll think it holds no value. Inside are answers to the many questions I know still linger. Put it someplace safe and keep it to yourself.”

Lillya lifted one corner of the package to see what was inside. It was her father’s journal. “Some of the pages are soiled, but it’s all that you’ll need,” he told Lillya. “Now go. Finish getting yourself ready. You are not a young girl anymore, and don’t worry about your old Papa. He’s had a good life and more than any other person, it was you who brought me joy, and that son of yours, oh how I miss him.” Anton walked back in the house and her father kissed him on the cheek and grasped his hands.

“Take care of my daughter as you always have. You will be protected in the town of Kungur. It is near the city of Perm. When things have settled down, you will find some amusement there.”

Perm? I wonder if Natasha is there now. Lillya reflected silently.

“You will go to the lower part of the town,” her father continued. “On Kittarskaya Street is the Uspenskaya Church. My cousin Michael is friends with the priest,” he said, then glanced at Lillya to make certain she was listening. “He is expecting you, and the priest and his church have received large donations for this service. The church has places where you and Lillya will be able to hide in safety. Michael has many trustworthy friends. Besides, in doing this he is paying back an old debt.”

“Thank you, Papa. I promise we won’t forget. I love you.”

Staying behind was surely a death sentence, but he had decided there was not a better nor more fitting place for him to die. He had never needed such a big house nor so much property. It had been passed down to him as all property got passed down to the firstborn male. It was all he had ever known and now he had a lifetime of memories and was too old and formed in his habits to start anew. He loved his estate, the wine and the horses and he had always taken good care of the families who lived with them. There would be no goodbyes. Instead, two short French phrases rolled off his tongue later that day: “À la prochaine fois. Je t’embrasse très fort¹.” Then he did his best to smile.

¹ Until next time, I bid you farewell.

However, that was the day everything changed. Lillya could feel her father's eyes on her back, but she did not turn around. What she hoped would only be months turned into years, and her autumn-like figure had no choice but to march into winter just as she did.

Chapter 6

Yuri's estate, May 1884

Riding with arms stretched out wide, the wind on her face, she spoke softly to her horse, Pluto Gaetano, a gift from the Tsar, her cheeks blushed bright red. She couldn't contain her excitement, and she howled to the chipmunks, rabbits, squirrels, and all the animals of the forest. Lillya had grown tired of being so secretive. She wanted the world to know what they had accomplished.

Her horse prepared himself. He knew what was coming and he made an effort to keep an even, steady pace. He imitated her breath as if they were a part of one another. Then she stood upright on the horse's back and counted to eight, nine, ten. When she reached the number ten she came back down again. Rocking steadily forward, she was grinning from ear to ear.

“Good boy,” she said to the horse as she released the pressure in her knees. They came to a slow steady trot, then she nestled her head into his neck, feeling all of his muscles. “I'm so proud of you Pluto! I have an apple in my pocket. I brought it especially for you.” Then she gave him a hug. Suddenly she got the feeling that they were being watched as if a hunter was looking at its prey.

“Good boy,” she said softly to her horse again. “We’re not alone,” she mumbled under her breath, but instead of being frightened, she suddenly became very bold as if it were a statement of herself.

“Who are you and why are you in my woods? I demand you announce yourself!” There was not a sound except for some rustling in the bushes. Then she caught a glimpse of a young boy who she believed worked close by. “Not again,” she said just loud enough for him to hear.

This was the third time the boy had come to watch her ride. He had to have woken up very early to do so as she rode every morning between eight and nine. She decided he must be very shy otherwise he’d have introduced himself, so she shouldn’t punish him too badly. Besides, she had recently shared her new trick with her father.

Lillya didn’t get too close, Natasha said he was smitten by her command of horses and also her horse. “You are well beyond average in every way,” Natasha said. “you will mesmerize many others, I just know it!” “Mesmerize,” Lillya liked that word.

Then she became a bit angry. He knew who she was, but he was still a mystery to her.

Lillya circled the boy with her horse. The boy followed her with his eyes as if she were a crystal ball spinning in circles as fast as she could. Still, he did not run, he just seemingly grew dizzy. He was frozen.

“Next time plan on introducing yourself,” she yelled to the boy and then she galloped off in the direction of home. “Who is this boy and what does he want?” Then she smiled, realizing she enjoyed the mystery.

Lillya began humming to herself. She liked to hum. She liked the way it felt. The vibrations massaged her insides which always got a little jumbled up between her equestrian tricks and the feelings she was having for a boy she had never met. It also helped to pass the time and before she knew it, Lillya was back at her father’s stable, and the stable boy had taken hold of the reins of the magnificent stallion.

Lillya couldn’t get the image of the boy in the woods out of her mind. “Maybe he won’t come again,” she thought. Then she found herself hoping she was wrong. As much as he angered her, he intrigued her twice that amount.

She excelled above all the other girls her age in her riding ability, but she had one thing that she kept as a secret that was an embarrassment to her. She had a single large mole in the middle of her back that was shaped like a heart. Lillya felt as if she had been marked when it came to love, but she

didn't know for what or why. When she was a child, she and Natasha would try to rub the mole away, but as she grew older, she had to come to terms with the fact it wasn't going away. "Yes, God has a plan for me," she would say to Natasha, the only person who knew. "This way he will know for certain how to find me when he is ready and be certain I was the one."

Lillya never met anyone besides Natasha who could replicate her spirit. Natasha was proud and self-confident, but it was hard for her, being so smart, to be stuck in a lower station in life. Born the daughter of a maid, she couldn't help but feel that she had been misplaced. Natasha's quick wit was apparent to anyone who met her, and it seemed impossible for her to keep it entirely to herself. She recognized how lucky she was to have been placed in Yuri's household on this beautiful estate and to have become Lillya's best friend.

Her father Yuri was very generous, and on some deep level, Lillya saw that he felt bad for Natasha and his compassion made her love him more. He secretly left books under her pillow. Each time Natasha found a new book she would devour it, staying up late at night until her eyes got weary and she could no longer lift her head.

Thinking about her station in life only got her depressed so she focused on other things, like pleasing Lillya and Yuri.

Lillya and Natasha became inseparable, and Natasha hoped it would never end. Lillya, not one to look too far down the road, did not see that life would eventually take them down different paths. Though Lillya's father Yuri knew that day would come, he reconciled himself to it by knowing that in the meantime he was doing something good. He gave Natasha a good home where she could be educated, challenged, and cared for, and he gave his daughter a best friend and confidante, who she could love and trust.

Chapter 7

Road from St. Petersburg to Kungur, April 1918

Keeping a secret is much harder to do when your audience is already mistrusting. No one seemed to tell the truth. The trick was to be able to sense the true from the false and learn to interpret an ever-changing code. The White Army was made up mostly of Russia's armed forces, members of the upper classes, and soldiers from other nations. They didn't like one another, and they certainly weren't unified. At least that is what Anton told Lillya.

But then again, Lillya thought, even my father was not completely truthful until he handed me his journal. Or one could say he told the truth with great omissions. This leather-bound book would speak more intimately to Lillya in her father's voice, than he had his whole life. Their fire's flames drew her into herself and got her thinking of her family's sumptuous townhouse on Shvedskiy Lane in the Golden Triangle district with its gigantic fireplace. She wondered if those striking flames from so many years prior were trying to tell her something and she wasn't listening.

Then a spark from the fire made a loud crackling sound and shook her back to the present. In the distance, she could hear horses galloping and wondered if they were White or Red, or perhaps Czech? The army had been

fighting a foreign war on the German front, but now it found itself in a civil war and there were famous regiments on both sides of the struggle.

Her ears followed the sound of the riders while her mind spun nervous ideas. *Maybe they are just like us, people on the run and hiding. Still,* she thought, *I'll hold my breath until they pass.*

The cruelty of both sides had become well-known. Lillya knew that their lives could easily depend upon the whimsy of a handful of soldiers. And their fate would be decided by what kind of night or day these soldiers had had. If the soldiers had had a good day, they might only take your food and horses. On a bad day, they would also shoot you and not think twice.

Lillya thought about the journal her father had given to her. She was anxious to read it. She was having a hard time falling asleep. The abandoned cabin they were in was cold and dark. Still, she and Anton were grateful for the cover from the wind. Lillya watched Anton's stomach rising up and down and every once in a while, he would make a funny little squeaking sound through his nostrils.

Trying not to make any noise while making sure he was asleep, she put his handkerchief lightly over his nose to lessen the sound and quietly slipped her thumb and her index finger into the bag that carried her

belongings, including now her father's journal, hoping to pull out just a little corner of truth before she said goodnight to the moon and stars.

"Just a few words and I'll put it right back," she said as if she were bargaining with God. Anton's snoring became much deeper and since he was a light sleeper she didn't want to wake him, nor did she want him to catch her reading a journal he knew nothing about. Her father had asked her to keep it to herself and that's what she intended to do.

Afraid to pull it completely out of her bag, Lillya squinted, trying to make out one word at a time, but the sky was too dark. She squinted until her eyes hurt and the chill from being outside her covers overrode her curiosity. She would wait. Then, just as she was about to close the journal, the name Michael popped out.

Anton's legs were getting restless and soon his eyes would open. Lillya began to shake. She wasn't certain if it was the fear of being caught or the thought of betraying her father, or if she had just chilled herself to the bone. Quickly, she wrapped the journal back into the maid's towel and threw it in her satchel.

Anton shook his right leg and sat up. "What are you doing up, my dear? You're going to need to be rested, we have a long ride ahead of us." Seeing she was shaking, he came over with another blanket, bent down and

gave her a kiss. She thanked him and closed her eyes. *The journal will be there in the morning*, she told herself. *Maybe if I keep my eyes closed long enough, I will really fall asleep.* But before she knew it, small rays of sunlight had found their way into the cabin. Soon they would be planning their day.

The clop, clop sound of the horses she had been focusing on earlier was now in the distance. Anton having covered the fire with a big pot, hoping not to completely suffocate it, gave her a cup of coffee. It was resting by her feet that were wrapped in her blanket as she tried to keep warm.

Anton, knowing how tired his wife had become, more from the emotional stress than the physical, felt a need to push Lillya a bit with the inspiration of something that would be tangible. “In a few weeks time the weather will begin to warm, flowers will bloom, and the air will fill with birds.” Lillya laughed, “And the ice will melt, and the roads will turn to mud.”

He could tell by the look on her face he was going to have to pull out all the circus tricks he carried to get her moving again and to give up her blanket for the cold and unknown.

Anton appealed to Lillya's adventurous spirit. "I can almost smell the scent of Kungur leather in the distance." Anton, for the sake of his wife, wore a positive playful face.

"Yes," said Lillya, doing her best to let her husband know that she hadn't lost her humor, looked at her husband and said in a dry voice with a sly grin, "We're going to Kungur," then she paused for several seconds, put on a smile, and said, "Isn't that the last stop before nowhere?"

Anton and Lillya burst out in laughter and Lillya, who couldn't stop herself from being satirical added, "I guess it's not so bad. At least we'll be on the west side of the mountain range. Think of our Tsar and his family; they're on the Eastern side in Siberia with five million hectares of nothing but isolation, ice and snow. We should be grateful. We'll be near Perm where there's a decent opera, and I hear they grow watermelon in the summer," she said in an almost joyful voice while under her breath she was thinking, *maybe Natasha will be there.*

"Perm Province is large," Anton recited. "Remember we will be at the mercy of others. This is not a vacation."

Lillya had never been to Siberia, but all Russians had heard stories of the place and at times found ways to romanticize the rough life it took to survive with its unique qualities, but mostly they shuddered with fear at the

thought of being forced to live there. Some had compared it to a batch of stew where a little of everything was thrown in until it became something new. European prisoners of war mixed with native aboriginal tribesmen, and they sometimes spiced the pot by throwing in a Russian Jew or political exile. Then there was the Trans-Siberian Railway, workers from around the world populated that path for over 15 years while they built it.

For a few minutes Lillya had given herself permission to daydream. Every once in a while, as Anton spoke, she caught a glimpse of her old self. The teenage girl who galloped through the woods like a streak of lightning while standing upright on the back of Pluto Gaetano, the black Orlov-Rostopchin from Tsar Alexander III's stable.

She and Anton had been on edge long before they had left Petrograd, a name she couldn't get used to, the new name of her beloved St. Petersburg. She had forgotten what it was like to have no reason to hide and oh how Anton hated being the one holding the kite string, adjusting how far away Lillya could drift before she needed to be pulled back in and to the ground. He had married a free spirit and that was the woman Lillya liked and the one that he loved.

Chapter 8

Yuri's estate, January 1886

Petra and Dmitri Vronsky from the famous Vronsky Family Circus were coming to their home to show her father a young Arabian mare they thought would be good for breeding. "They'll be staying for supper," her father announced earlier.

Lillya had never been to the circus, and she was curious. She had been brought up to believe that you only went to the circus if you had been invited to watch the performers at the palace of the Tsar. It was beneath them, but recently her father had changed his mind. As he got to know Dmitri better, he found himself growing fonder of the man who was a master on the tightrope and a wizard when it came to horses.

Dmitri was well educated and very clever, besides being strong and brave. All qualities Yuri admired, he enjoyed Dmitri's dry wit and sense of humor. "The man says what he thinks and doesn't stop himself from expressing what he really feels. Most men are afraid of what other men might think, but this makes him courageous in my eyes."

Lillya started talking excitedly while the maid was helping her dress. "Papa says when Mr. Vronsky touches a horse something magical happens.

He knows which ones to choose. It's as if they speak to him," she told Natasha.

Natasha was fumbling through Lillya's drawers.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Got it!" and Natasha pulled out a simple gold necklace to complement Lillya's ruby, along with a matching bracelet.

"Now that's perfect," she said, feeling quite satisfied with herself. "They'll be here within the hour, we must hurry."

A blue-green gown with gold threads was waiting on Lillya's bed, but first they had to fix her hair. "If you move any slower, they'll find someone to replace me and then what would you do?" Natasha teasingly barked.

"Papa would never replace you. I couldn't live without your company," Lillya replied. "I'd have to go on a hunger strike."

Natasha smiled because she knew Lillya was telling the truth. Looking out the window Lillya saw the Vronskys coming up to the house from the stables. "Papas got a smile on his face. He must have liked what he saw. Looks like he decided she's the one."

Lillya quickly walked down the stairs into the parlor where the Vronskys and her father had just been poured drinks and the help was serving caviar. Yuri seemed to be quite taken by the couple. He rarely

grinned and only showed his poker face to strangers, but on this occasion, he could barely fit all the happiness he felt inside himself.

Petra's petite figure was dressed in a bold royal blue and her pitch-black shiny hair was pulled back in a perfect twist. Her smile, so bright and warm, could disarm any soldier it came face to face with. Any man determined to do battle with her would surely succumb to her radiance alone. Yet Lillya noticed Petra was relaxed and seemed to not notice her effect on men. She would throw her head back and laugh as if she were the only one in the room. She was cheerful and kind and clearly loved her life and her husband most of all.

"Our daughter Lillya is the horsewoman of our family. Oh, how she is going to love your horse! Lillya, this is Mr. and Mrs. Vronsky from the famed Vronsky Family Circus," Yuri said.

"Your father has told us much about you," Mr. Vronsky replied. "He said that you can already ride standing up. That says much about your character."

"I find if one is balanced, not afraid and speaks kindly to a horse she knows quite well, that almost anything is possible," Lillya replied. "That is with practice, of course."

"I must agree," Petra Vronsky replied. "I have seen tricks on horses that would stump a magician." Lillya instantly liked her.

A butler called them in for supper. Lillya caught a glimpse of Natasha at the top of the stairs and was happy she was listening in. She wished that she could call Natasha down to join them, but they both knew their place. She would have to share the evening with her later.

Biting into a Cornish game hen, she admired their cook's ability to add just the right amount of paprika on top of it and dole out to each person a perfect serving size of rosemary potatoes. Lillya soon forgot about Natasha, savoring each morsel of food and especially the conversation. She let her father take the lead, remembering they had company, for it might have sounded rude for her to ask the questions she wanted to know the answers to immediately.

Finally, they got around to the subject Lillya was most interested in hearing about, the circus. She was besotted by a story Dmitri told about their tigers Midnight and Satin. They were recently given to the Vronskys by a Prince from India after he saw their circus perform for the Tsar and his children on the lawn of the Winter Palace. Dmitri said, "I was rehearsing one afternoon when all of a sudden, I heard a tremendous amount of commotion outside. I stopped to see what was happening and when I went out front

there were five royal carriages and a hand-painted, gilded cage with the names Midnight and Satin painted on it. By now Petra was outside next to me.”

“Yes,” Petra agreed.

“Holding Petra’s hand, I inched in closer. A man in formal Indian dress handed me a letter and said, ‘This is a gift from the prince. You must have made quite an impression.’

“Inside the gilded cage were two tiger kittens, playing with a big ball of yarn. The representative continued to say that they had been abandoned on the prince’s estate and that the prince himself had personally nursed them back to health. So, what was I to do,” Dmitri said, “but to graciously accept them?”

“I used to go inside their cage and play with them until they got too big,” Petra said. Lillya’s ears perked up even more when Petra mentioned they had a son who walked the high-wire and was also a notable horseman. She got chills just thinking of anyone walking across a wire fifty feet up in the air, for only Natasha knew that Lillya became afraid of heights if there was not something solid between her and the ground. A horse was solid, so she had no problem standing up while galloping on a rosin-back. “Anyone

can do what I do if they want to, but to walk a wire, why that is magnificent.”

Petra could see Lillya was mesmerized by the glint in her eyes that became similar to the accepting look in her father’s eyes. Neither of them could hide their fascination.

Later that night when she shared the events of the evening with Natasha, she did not fail to mention, “Oh, and did I tell you, his mother told me they have a son who walks the high wire?”

“I wonder why they made no offer of an introduction. They didn’t even tell me his name. They simply said he was talented and had a playful sort of personality. They should know that I’m old enough to meet their son” Lillya went on. “Thank goodness for Papa though. By the end of the evening, he decided to put his stallion Phosphorous with their mare Pepper. Then he promised the Vronskys that we would attend their circus sometime soon.”

“After all, our horses are going to bring our families together,” Lillya’s father said to the Vronskys as they were leaving. But he didn’t know how true his words would become.

Chapter 9

Road to Kungur, May 1918

Anton gathered a large stick at the beginning of the journey and marked it each morning to keep track of the days since they left Lillya's father's estate. Without it, they would have lost all track of time. *Just one more long, grueling day*, Anton thought as he marked the twig for what he hoped would be the last time. *If I'm right, by day's end we'll be able to stop, and I can finally give that wife of mine a rest.* He had become quite conversant with himself and the horses, too.

After all the traveling, planning, fear and hardships along the way, Anton said the words she had most wanted to hear for days, "If we hurry, my dear, I believe we can reach Kungur before sunset."

Lillya rarely complained. She knew it would do no good. Still, she had to admit she was looking forward to sleeping in the same place for more than one night and would be happy to be able to let her guard down a bit when they settled into wherever they would be staying, however simple or rustic.

She dedicated one giant yawn and said a quick prayer before getting down to the business of the day. Soon, she would be able to spend hours tucked away with her father's journal, unraveling the secrets she was

positive she would find. She felt guilty just thinking about it, remembering seeing the name Michael, a chill ran up and down her spine. He was taking a big risk by hiding them. Maybe her father Yuri blackmailed him, or perhaps Michael was indebted to return a big favor? *All in due time*, she thought, smiling at Anton. Enough of their life had been torn apart. She wasn't so certain that her father had done her a favor by giving her his journal, but she couldn't resist it. Anton recognized that smile but decided for his sake he was better off not asking her what it meant.

For a while, she had forgotten how tired her feet and legs had become, not to mention her swollen ankles. She thought about her son Vladimir and his family. *Does he look like his father? Do any of his girls resemble me perhaps in spirit?*

Lillya missed her son horribly and she cursed her country and all of its stupid political factions for the reasons he lived so far away and for the pain that she felt from never having held any of her granddaughters, but Anton had been needed in the early years by his parents and of course Lillya had her father Yuri. She recited the names of Vladimir's children. "Let's see, Ann Marie Heart, Spade, Diamond Claire, and Lucia Akinsya Club. The last child was named after herself, as her full name was Lillya Xenia Akinsya Engelhardt. Akinsya had come from Lillya's great-grandmother, and she

liked thinking there was an old Russian name that she wore, too, floating around in that young country, the United States.

They had taken a short stop so Lillya could stretch. "If all goes well, tonight we'll be sleeping in Kungur," Anton repeated once more. Then with hopeful eyes he handed Lillya the reins of Sophie, the sturdy workhorse she had ridden all of these months. For this trek she needed a calm steady Orlov Trotter, like Sophie, able to bear a heavy load for days on end, not fazed by the Russian Arctic wind.

She could see a small supply of hopefulness in Anton's eyes. Things were about to change. "If we are lucky, we will arrive around dusk."

Lillya smiled at Anton. She was thinking of her cousin Michael. She had a vague recollection of him. She met him once as a child and he had left quite an impression on her like a map in her memory. She could only have been four or five because her mother was still alive. They had a simple lunch together and he did not stay long after the meal. She remembered that day clearly because her father Yuri had put the guest of honor between Natasha and Lillya's mother.

Lillya remembered Michael was very distinguished looking with salt and pepper hair and he had a mustache that he waxed and wore turned up. He seemed serious, but then he'd tell a joke, and no one laughed harder than

him, and his smile would suddenly grow twice as big. Then he would cough as if he were choking on his own joke and laugh as if it was too big for even him. As a young girl she found him very mysterious. She caught her father sometimes whispering his name. He was her mother's favorite cousin and therefore there was an air of myth that surrounded him for no other reason. "He's going to be very old," she said to Anton as he reset the bridle on her horse. It had somehow gotten twisted.

Then a horrified look covered her own face. "Think of the shock he'll have when he sees me!" Up until that moment she had forgotten about how much older she had become. But then she thought, *all her cousin Michael would have to do would be to look at her jaw and the small dimple in the middle of her chin and her painterly nose with a perfect slant. Some things don't change; they stay the same. And she wore the family crest just like every other proud and true Englehardt. Yes, her cousin would believe she was who she claimed to be. He'd be able to see it in her face. She wore it as clearly as the statue of David rested his chin on his hand contemplating the woes of the world and his own.*

Chapter 10

Yuri's estate, February 1886.

Yuri could hear giggling coming from Lillya's room. Lillya had convinced her father to put another bed in her room for the night so she and Natasha could live out their dream of being sisters. Lillya's father had begun to worry because he knew the truth of their situation, their class difference, would very soon become a problem. He could shelter them as children but soon it would not be so easy. Natasha would not be invited to any of the parties and events that Lillya would attend, and he assumed that after a while it was going to bother Natasha to dress up her best friend to go to parties while she had to stay home and clean up the mess they made in the process of getting dressed. But the one thing Yuri didn't take into account was just how left out Lillya felt when all the girls would talk about their mothers. They would chatter about outings, going for tea or to the seamstress with their mothers. She really missed Angelika and really wished her special job had been to just take care of her. Did the angels really need her so badly?

Soon winter would be over, and Lillya's father had arranged a grand vacation for the coming summer. He had decided that they would go to France. Besides the glamor of being in France, Lillya knew that few girls her age were given this opportunity and that it gave her something they did not

have, even if they all had mothers. But sadly, Natasha would not be coming with them. Her father had explained that she would have a young French girl helping her with the language, her clothing, the culture, her manners, and by the end of her time there, he told her she would know the difference between what was good or bad, for the French were the trendsetters of the world. What they said set the bar for everyone else.

Quietly, Yuri had thought it a good idea to begin to separate the girls without them understanding it was planned. He didn't really like the idea himself, but culture and class systems were going to dictate every aspect of their lives and so he thought taking his daughter on an extended vacation might be a good start. He could think of no better or kinder exciting idea than this. Yuri went on to bait Lillya, knowing her love of horses, "There's a very famous cavalry school in the Loire Valley, in the town in which we will be staying, Saumur." Then he winked at her and finished, "If you mind your manners and are very good, perhaps I will find a way to arrange a tour for you?" He knew when he said this it would heighten his daughter's curiosity and then she would do almost anything he wanted.

"Boys and horses and a famous riding academy," Lillya silently thought. "Hmm." She had to be careful not to let the smile in her eyes take over her face. "Tell me about this journey you have planned for us," Lillya

smiled mildly. Yuri had rented the east wing of a Chateau in the northwestern part of France from a man named Sergei who also had a great interest in horses and cultivated a small grape vineyard from which he made his own wines.

“The Chateau was built by a famous architect. Sergei will be able to tell you the story in more detail, but unlike many of the homes in that area, this one is full of light. Sergei loves to paint when he has the time, and light is important to him, as is being on the water,” Yuri went on. “There are very few inclusions one needs to show for one’s house to qualify as being a Chateau, but there is that one exception.” Lillya was now on the edge of her seat the way her father drew out his story. Expecting something very large and dramatic, she was a bit disappointed when her father told her the answer. “Your home must rest on the Loire River or one of its tributaries,” he stated.

Lillya cried back, “But the Loire River is the longest river in France. How hard can that be?” Yuri always felt more disappointed in himself when he disappointed his daughter. “Its beauty has attracted many artists and many nobles have been drawn to the area like magnets. In the 1400’s, King Louis XI of France found its beauty so intoxicating, he practically moved the entire capital of France from Paris to the Loire Valley. Besides, all the

nobles were already traveling to the region during the summer and spending their vacations there. He just made it a little easier for them to do so.”

“I believe Sergei had his house fixed from top to bottom in the late 1860’s, so it is up to date.” Yuri smiled, “You’ll like this; it still has a small moat and a drawbridge. I’m told it has Belgian and Flemish tapestries covering many of the walls, and many other beautiful pieces of art, including some of his paintings.” He sighed for a moment before continuing, “I think it sounds like a picture from one of your favorite fairy tales. You’ll like it! But best of all, he has an unusually fine stable of horses. I believe the location will appeal to your imagination, heart and soul. There are a number of castles in this region. They were built as fortresses a long time ago, when they were needed to keep the gentry safe. But now they are used to house very wealthy families, and their horses are used for breeding, races, and contests; pleasure, not fighting. You’ll see.”

Then he turned around as if he were planning to change the subject to something else but couldn’t stop himself from going on. “Some of my favorite grapes are grown there.” Yuri stopped for a moment, “I wish I could just count to ten and we’d be there.”

Chapter 11

Road to Kungur, May 1918

Lillya dreamed of spending an afternoon in a comfortable chair next to a window. Basking in the indulgence of not having to travel every day, she imagined what it would be like to have her body clean again and not have to look for a river to jump in. They had all known that they would have to travel during the summer, for the winter in Kungur would be the coldest she had ever known.

She laughed when she thought of all the pretty dresses she had left behind, and wondered about Alexi, her dressmaker, who was now probably sewing buttons on officers' uniforms from whichever army had grabbed him first.

There isn't much in the way of choices these days, she mused. Life just happens for all of us now. We wade through muck and sludge that slows us down or takes us places we never would have chosen to go.

However, for Lillya, Kungur actually sounded exciting, for she was tired of living in fear and wanted to feel as if she had some control over her life and its destiny. She wished she could express all her thoughts to Anton, but he was already frightened for her and if she did, she was afraid they might scare him more.

Being a noble man, Anton set very high expectations for himself, and he would not budge or lower them to make them easier. Sometimes Lillya would tease him about his moral code, but deep down inside there was no one she would trust more with her life if she had to put it in someone else's hands. She knew he felt a huge commitment to protect her, even sometimes from herself. Too often, he would find himself pulling the kite string to bring her back to safety.

"I understand that there is no time for pleasure today," Lillya said to Anton as she bent down to pick a poppy from a field close by. The rain and unusually warm weather had sent everything to distract her. A golden summer breeze was working its way in and would push her all the way to Kungur, she thought. "Let the wind blow me and all our baggage away," she said teasingly to Anton. "Blow me into the unknown," she continued.

She could feel the string in Anton's hand yanking her back to the ground. "If only one of my father's stallions could magically appear, even for ten minutes, but I can't afford to think like that, still sometimes I can't help myself." Lillya quieted down. She couldn't blame Anton for their predicament, so she continued urging the workhorse forward, kicking the dirt and muck aside, learning to appreciate the poppies from afar. To pass

the time she imagined a little house in Kungur that she would decorate and call home.

The first thing she saw was a large stone fireplace that rivaled the one in their townhouse in St. Petersburg, but that was long ago, and she knew her thought was too big. But most of all, this little house in Kungur would be a place where she did not have to worry. *If times weren't so bad, we'd still be at my father's estate. But for now, I need to reconcile that I can be happy with a little hint of sunlight caressing my face and not feel the need to run.*

When her nose picked up a foul scent, she realized it was herself. She was certain she was wretched by now and Anton was too kind. Lillya smiled as thoughts ran through her head, scattering like children on a playground. *Maybe our scents have blended with each other's and now we don't know whose is whose.*

“Lillya, where have you been?” Anton asked, knowing quite well the answer. “We need to stay very alert today. I know it’s very hard, darling, but today you must listen to my commands. I promised your father I would get you to Kungur and Michael in safe condition and I’m not about to prove myself wrong. So, I’ll need your help.”

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Lillya said with a wink. “Don’t you know I always listen to you?”

Anton started to laugh with his deep belly laugh that put a smile on her face. “Okay, my dear, what direction do we go from here?”

“We want to go northeast. Let me get my compass out.” He reached into his pocket and took out the trusty compass that had once been his father’s; the one he had counted on since he was a young boy. Lillya believed in it, too, for it had gotten them this far.

“Why don’t you tell us, my dear,” Anton said.

Lillya tied her hair back in a bun, pretending it wasn’t even there, and then said to her husband Anton, “Turn left. I too can smell the leather from the Kungur factories getting near.”

Lillya and Anton knew so much depended upon what would happen this day. Would Michael and his friends be there looking for them as her father had promised, Lillya wondered. Or would he have taken her father’s money and found he had better things to do than wait for a cousin he hadn’t seen in forty years who had nothing to offer him but trouble and stories from the past?

Anton questioned whether Michael’s loyalty was strong enough and whether he was brave enough to show up at the church every night for weeks on end, waiting for his cousin and her husband to arrive, when he hadn’t seen her since she was a child. Anton prayed that he would recognize

her. But with the dimple in her chin and her perfect slanted nose Lillya had no doubt that this Englehardt would recognize another.

Chapter 12

Yuri's estate, March 1886

In late March, before their scheduled trip to France, her father finally got around to making a date for them to attend a performance of the Vronsky Family Circus. Lillya was beside herself.

"I can't believe how excited I am," Lillya said to Natasha. "I'm finally going to see that son of theirs that no one has introduced me to. They're not going to get away with that tonight, I'm going to insist they introduce us and if I like him, I'm going to make Papa promise to invite him to see our stables. I'm told his name is Anton. Can you imagine going out with a boy that walks a high wire!"

That night Lillya wore her favorite blue lace dress with a blue and yellow scarf to match. It was the color of the sea at sunset with embroidered golden threads running through it and burnt orange threads intertwined to accentuate the gold that looked like the sun setting on the sea. She hoped her father would like Anton as much as she thought she would. "Maybe he'll invite him over to ride next Sunday?" She loudly mumbled to Natasha, trying to swallow a bite of her dinner at the same time. She could barely keep her food down. Butterflies were flying so rapidly in her stomach, fluttering at such a pace, she didn't know if she could keep her composure. It

was if her stomach was their designated migrating ground, only all the action was not between one tree and then another, but instead inside of her. They were hitting the wall of her insides so hard and fast she thought one might escape through her belly button.

When Lillya got nervous Natasha liked to tease her, but this time Natasha understood the importance of this event for Lillya and decided she could goad her some other time about something else.

Vronsky Family Circus, May 1886

The circus tent was teal blue and burnt orange with a big bright gold sign that lit up the sky and it read, *The Vronsky Family Circus*. Located near the Bolshoi, everyone in St. Petersburg knew where to find it. Dmitri and Petra Vronsky had arranged a special parking place where Yuri and Lillya might park their carriage.

Petra and Dmitri seemed to be almost as excited as Lillya and Yuri. They knew that if Yuri and Lillya spoke highly of the circus, more aristocrats and members of the upper class would follow their lead. It would also help to keep them in the good graces of Tsar Alexander III and his wife Maria. They were escorted to the best seats in the house, front row and

center, that had been draped with a beautiful purple fabric that was adorned with stars and hearts of gold and deep ruby reds.

Lillya noticed all the eyes in the big top tent were staring at her and she couldn't help but admit to herself that she liked it and was glad she had taken the extra time getting dressed for the event. Caught in a web of her own thoughts when the tigers entered, she smiled at the foolishness of thinking she could possibly outshine the natural beauty of their coats. They were wearing the most striking silk she had ever seen and the audience seemed to agree for their attention quite naturally turned from herself to them. Her eyes had become fixated on the circus and nothing else, and she had an instant uncontrollable pining to be a part of it.

"What magnificent creatures!" Lillya said to her father, poking his elbow until he listened to her. She already had a special affinity for them, having heard Petra speak of them at dinner. "Their names are Midnight and Satin," she said to him as if she had been the only one who had heard the conversation. And just at that exact moment their trainer brought them within a breath of their proximity. Midnight opened his mouth as if to show off his prize-winning sharp teeth. Satin, attached to Midnight, came so close to them that Lillya felt as if she could almost touch her.

And quicker than she could process what had just happened, in walked the elephants. Lillya had never seen such big creatures. Atop one of the elephants, dressed in purple satin, was Petra, whose arms, though long, were impossible to wrap around the big elephant's neck.

After several tricks and a roar of applause from the audience, Petra quickly changed clothes and entered the ring playing a flute while standing upright on her horse's saddle with a big red feather plume popping out of the thick satin deeper red headband. Lillya smiled at her father. Petra's outfit was a bit risqué, but she was so brilliant in her moves and the way she commanded her horse that no one could refer to her as cheap or inappropriate. They could only stare at her in amazement and awe.

Then the moment arrived. Twenty-five feet up in the air was the boy she had admired from conversation. She had never seen him. A little shorter and stockier than she had thought for such a position, but seemingly kinder and cooler than she imagined possible for someone about to embark on such a treacherous feat. Her heart started to rattle and shake so loud she was afraid her father might hear it. By the time he started juggling plates and had walked to the other side, she was already on her feet ready to give a standing ovation. Realizing how anxious she must look, she sat down.

That night when the circus ended, Petra Vronsky arranged a little table to be put into one of the smaller tents and invited Yuri and Lillya to join them for some Schnapps, Vodka and pastry. The tent had a nice golden glow that comforted Lillya. Still, she was a bit nervous, and her father knew it. “Only a sip,” Yuri reminded Lillya. “Just wet your lips.” Earlier, Yuri had teased Lillya, saying that he had told Petra they couldn’t come because it would be too late for his daughter. Lillya turned beet red and just about burst until she realized her father was joking.

It turned out Lillya was the opposite of shy when it came to Anton Vronsky. Her tongue wiggled and waggled one sentence, paragraph, page after another. “He was so easy to talk to,” she told Natasha later that evening. “I’ve never talked to someone as smart as he that was close to our age. I think I might be in love.”

Natasha had a pot of chamomile tea waiting for their return, knowing she would have to calm Lillya down. “Why are we going to stupid France,” Lillya said later that night to Natasha. She knew she didn’t mean it. Any girl would give her eyeteeth to have a summer in France, walk the Champs-Élysées, visit the Cadre Noir in Saumur, and live among the castles most others would only visit, for the Loire Valley was known to have some of the largest and most beautiful Chateaux in the world. “The one summer I would

want to stay home, father insists we go, and he's not about to change his plans!"

Natasha could not feel sorry for Lillya. Oh, how she wished she could go in her place. But that night when Lillya closed her eyes, the only one she could see was Anton. Hypnotized by his confidence and talent, he was throwing one plate and then another higher and higher.

Chapter 13

Road to Kungur, June 1918

Drenched in the last of what could be called summer sunlight, they continued toward Kungur. A sly smile appeared on Lillya's face. Anton didn't want to know the reason why. He could feel his wife's heart pounding harder, the closer she thought they were to their destination. Wrapped up in her own thoughts, she was caught completely off-guard when suddenly, a boulder came rolling down the hill aimed right where they were walking.

Luckily, Anton had quick reflexes and was accustomed to acting on instinct just as he had been taught to do since childhood. He urgently grabbed the horse's reins, pulled them hard and quickly got them out of the boulder's path. Lillya didn't know what was happening until she felt Anton give her horse a swift tug, changing her direction and speed and she suddenly heard the sound of a giant boulder rolling past her.

When it was over, she froze and stood there shaking. It took a minute or two for her to register just how close she came to dying. Anton had just saved her life. Anton standing next to Lillya was shaking, too. The boulder had gotten very close to its target unless it had just been a fluke of nature, but Anton had to think of himself like a soldier leading the cavalry, and his job was to deliver precious cargo safely, without a scratch if possible.

Anton didn't really want to know who or what was behind this close call, their near mishap. He wanted to make light of it and didn't want Lillya to become more frightened than she already was. Putting on his best face, he looked at Lillya with a grave expression and said to her "Man can plan all he wants, but Nature is a force that has its own mind. It is always going to do what it pleases and will roar as loud as it wants and cause as much havoc and hardship as will fill its stomach."

Lillya replied, "But luckily, my dear, I have you. Nature doesn't know the will and the force I have at my side!"

Anton had simply reacted. He hadn't had time to think. Lillya slowed her breathing and began to normalize. Silently, her composure returned, her green eyes began to sparkle, color returned to her cheeks, and one could see the natural beauty of her youth. She wanted Anton to know she had relaxed. That they could go forward. Anton, wanting to break the hardened air that had entered the circle that surrounded them, decided to tell a joke. Lillya loved that he was trying to make a joke during such a serious time. For only moments before, getting to Kungur could have been the least of their worries.

Anton knew how to focus more than anything else. Nothing could break his concentration when he had somewhere to go and something to do, and in this moment, it was to see a smile on his wife's face, so he continued.

The Austrian clown Leo told him a funny story. Amused, Anton smiled to himself when he realized the coat Lillya was wearing had once been Leo's wife's coat. He had talked to Anton about the art of illusion and how sometimes it could be more powerful than the truth. He spoke about a clown who had tried to win the one and only position with a circus, but the circus had advertised that they were looking for a clown who could ride a unicycle and they were interested in no others.

The clown was so determined that even though he could not ride it, he bought a unicycle and made it very visible to the owners. And because they saw the bike, they did not question whether the owner knew how to ride one. He had only used it as a prop, an illusion, so he would appear more useful so the circus would hire him. But in reality, his finest skill was sticking a mop between his legs and running around in circles as if he were a donkey who had lost his mind and didn't know which way to go. Mimicking a costumed mop to look like a donkey got more laughs, anyway. With a unicycle one needed skill, a mop you just needed imagination, to be able to move your

limbs and be funny and give the audience room to laugh. That's what jokes are about. Giving the other space and time to find something funny.

Lillya, not wanting to admit that she had been shaken, suggested that they stop for a short period of time. They could sip some Bergamot citrus tea just like the Tsar would be doing at this hour had he not been summering on the other side of the mountain range where they would soon take refuge. Anton, fearing that the large stone could have come from a misplaced soldier out for revenge, or simply wanting to steal their horses, urged Lillya on by talking about the boar they might eat that night, the feast they might have.

A safe place where I can read my father's journal, without drawing attention to myself, she thought. In her mind she was going over the directions her father had given them.

"Enter the back entrance of the church when the parishioners are leaving after the evening service is complete. In all that commotion it is less likely anyone will notice you. Still, you must be very careful."

Chapter 14

Yuri's estate, April 1886

Natasha could hear Lillya tossing and turning. She was excited and happy for Lillya's excitement and joy, but she couldn't help but think about where all of this might leave her. Was this the beginning of what she knew one day would come? What she had been so fearful of coming? And Lillya would turn 16 while in France, without Natasha by her side.

The next morning when Natasha went downstairs to get Lillya's breakfast, she noticed that flowers and a note had already been dropped off for Lillya, she could only guess who they were from. But just then, Yuri walked into the kitchen. An unusual thing for him to do. He had noticed the flowers, too, and could only imagine what Natasha was thinking.

"You know these are not from Anton," Yuri told Natasha. Almost feeling he was betraying his daughter, he whispered, "These are from Petra." This made the two of them even more curious.

Yuri followed Natasha up the steps with Lillya's breakfast, the flowers and the note. When they walked into Lillya's room after first knocking and Lillya saw the flowers on her tray, before she had a second to open her mouth, Yuri blurted out, "Isn't this lovely? You got flowers and a note from Petra." You could see the disappointment immediately cross

Lillya's face. However, all three in attendance, including Lillya, knew that if anything was to go any further it would have to start with the parents, and in her case it would have to begin with the boy's mother.

"Why don't you open the note, my dear," Yuri said as Natasha handed her some fresh juice. "Dear Lillya," it read. "Dmitri and I and Anton were so pleased to have had your company last evening. We know that when it comes to animals, you love horses most of all, so I hope the circus did not bore you." Lillya interrupted and looked at her father and Natasha and said, "How could anyone be bored by the circus, it was the most fabulous show I have ever seen." Lillya paused for a second and went on, "I could have given each of them two standing ovations! They were magnificent, weren't they Papa?"

Natasha coughed into her hand then picked up the note and said politely, looking at Lillya and Yuri, "May I continue? There's more." Petra invited Lillya to go riding with her. Lillya could pick out any horse she wanted from their stable to ride that day. She wanted to know if Lillya could be available to ride two days from the current day. Lillya's head was about to burst once more and before Yuri could express his thoughts, his daughter penned a short note saying yes, yes, yes!

Lillya couldn't wait for the day to come. She played games with Natasha and let her win just so she would keep playing and she could keep herself occupied. She picked flowers and arranged them in beautiful vases, then brought out her watercolors and painted in a little sunroom off of the kitchen until the light left the sky and she could barely see. When it got too chilly, she continued to paint the pictures through the dining room window close to the large stone fireplace. Mostly, she was certain she would see Anton again. Each time she thought of him, chills rippled like a cool spring stream up and down her spine.

Natasha helped Lillya get dressed for Petra. She put on a beautiful pale-yellow dress that had a scarf that went with it that was stamped with purple orchids. Lillya loved orchids. For Anton, she would have Natasha gather flowers from the gardener in the greenhouse and put the flowers in her hair. About to walk out the door to grab some air so she would look fresh when Petra's carriage arrived to take her to their stable, a rider unexpectedly approached the house asking for Lillya. He was carrying a note. It was from Anton, *Dear Lillya, it said I am sorry, but I have been called away to answer business directed at my father. I'm sorry we will not have a chance to formally get together before I leave. Today is the day I have to go. I'm afraid it may be some time before we have another opportunity to exchange*

thoughts and ideas. My mother has explained to me that you will be leaving for France before my return. I find it sad that timing could get so in the way of discovering who you really are. This may be quite forward of me, but I'm wondering if you would meet for a few minutes right now. I know it won't be for very long.

The expression on Lillya's face completely changed and she began to read silently, keeping the words from Anton between only the two of them. *Could you meet me in five or ten minutes behind your father's barn? I can't bear the thought of not speaking to you without getting one word in right before I lose you to the horses and boys of France.*

Lillya looked at Natasha with pleading eyes, then showed her the note. "Will you help, Natasha?" Lillya asked. Natasha, knowing Lillya's stubborn streak, and that Lillya would go with or without her, nodded her head, yes.

Lillya's father was back in his library working away, so Lillya had a short window of time to do as she pleased, but she knew she'd better move fast. Natasha ran to grab Lillya's hand and together they quickly ran behind the barn paying no attention to the stable boys.

Several minutes later, Lillya could hear footsteps coming up from behind. Trying to remain calm, she took a breath and then three others.

Natasha took both Lillya's hands into her own and just that action alone helped her heart retain its normal beat. Not knowing what to say when Anton arrived, she simply remained silent. Lillya and Anton shyly embraced. Lillya knew his thoughts. She knew he would wait for her while she was in France. Quickly, he kissed her on the cheek, a typical French greeting, but his lack of words told her everything. Then he turned towards her with a big smile on his face, jumped on his horse and left.

Lillya tried to take a step forward but almost fell back. Then she looked at Natasha and said, "It's a good thing I don't walk the rope." Natasha started laughing and gathered Lillya's things and together they headed back toward the house.

Lillya's head was spinning. "He kissed me," she whispered. "He kissed me!"

When Petra's carriage arrived, she was much more silent than she would have normally been. Her head was somewhere else as she played that last scene with Anton over and over as if they were rehearsing the final scene of a play in a theater. Petra, a smart female, sensed the feelings behind Lillya's demeanor and said to herself, "I have no doubt my son had something to do with this."

Chapter 15

Road to Kungur, June 1918 – Same day as Chapter 13

They had fared fairly well. Their supplies had lasted and soon they would be among friendly company, have the underground support of a nearby church and a few of its most trusted members would help them to hide. Just thinking of it, Lillya started to feel the butterflies in her belly. She could barely wait to be around trusted company and sit at a proper table, drink wine and converse. Simply allowing these thoughts brought back memories of her father, and she wondered if he was still alive. Her father, she suspected, would be in his study waiting for the soldiers' arrival, and whether they be Red or White he would let them know, it was his patriotic duty to give up his estate to and for the people. Then if they were Reds he planned on shouting "Comrade," and if they were Whites, he would offer up his very best wine.

Her father and grandfather knew nobles that had kept 300,000 serfs. "What family needed such excess?" Behind closed doors Lillya recalled a conversation with her father earlier that year. "They got too greedy," he continued. "And now if they leave, they most likely leave with nothing. If they were lucky and smart they hid some of their family jewels. One necklace could buy them passage to America and keep them alive. I hope

you didn't send every last emerald and ruby to the States and remembered to keep a few for yourself and Anton." She listened attentively but said not a word.

Lillya found solace in knowing their affairs with the circus and their home had been settled before their world turned completely upside down. Thank goodness Anton and her father were forward-thinking men. Together they had made arrangements for her son Vladimir in the United States and provided him with more than enough to assure the legacy of his family and the circus.

Anton came from a long line of circus people, and he had inherited his family's circus, but that was many years ago. He had since given the circus to his son, who took it from Russia to Europe, then made a home in the southern United States traveling from one town to the next. But it was Lillya, it was her pedigree the armies would be most interested in. She was the reason they were running.

Anton and Lillya tried not to think about what had just happened. The boulder that fell had scared her, but Anton was sure-footed. Even so, he wondered, was it a random act of violence, was it some bored kid playing some sort of game or was it a displaced soldier from the Red or White army

hoping that if he brought back several horses and two prisoners that he might once again return to their good graces?

Lillya could see the thoughts jumping around in Anton's head, but she knew better than to ask him, for it would only stir things up and make them feel worse. They should just be grateful that nothing happened to them or their horses or even the displaced boy; after all she had a son and would hope that any mother would look at these almost children and think of their own progeny as well when making decisions.

So, she quickly changed the subject and surprisingly found herself speaking of Donatalia, the daughter of her old friend Katya from whom she had learned this tea recipe. Katya was the first person who had ever made it for her, oh so many years ago. For just a few seconds she could see this young girl dressed in her New Year's best, trying not to have the son of their hostess notice she was counting her forks and spoons. Trying very hard to act grown up. She could see Donatalia unable to contain her excitement as Anton told one story after another. Anton was in rare form that night, Lillya remembered.

Standing in the open so close to where the boulder could have so easily taken her life. Anton didn't know if his joke of the clown had worked, but something he had done or said he was certain had triggered the smile

that now appeared on her face. Lillya brought herself back to where they were standing and to that exact moment in time. Visions of ice castles and princesses and elephants carrying a cage disappeared when she heard her husband's voice break through the chatter that was going on in her head.

"I think it's time we get back on the horses," Anton said. "We've indulged in too much time already."

"You won't find any disagreement here," Lillya answered back. "I'm more than ready and my feet are, too."

The scare with the boulder left both Lillya and Anton tense. They didn't have much farther to go, but anything could happen. Anton tried to remind himself of this each step that they took and tried to remind Lillya too, without being too pesky. He told her, "Probably only four or five hours more to go before we arrive at Kungur."

Kungur was their final destination, for now at least. Still, he didn't want to get Lillya's hopes too high. The closer they got, the harder their journey seemed to become. It felt almost impossible. Lillya didn't know time could move so slowly. But looking at the sun and the way it was positioned in the sky and the speed at which they were traveling, Anton felt fairly certain they would make it. Besides, he couldn't bear the thought of his wife sleeping outdoors for one more night.

Lillya had put on a good face. She didn't want to show Anton how frightened she had been by many of the obstacles they encountered along the way, especially the boulder. Yet she couldn't stop her mind from thinking what could happen if they were found out. She felt guilty for having gotten Anton into this upper-class cauldron of trouble. She thanked God for having made her a woman, for the worst that would happen to her would be prison, but a man would most likely be sent to the front lines and certain death.

Besides, what would they want with me? Lillya had created numerous internal conversations with many imaginary people since they left. It made sense since there was nothing to do but to walk and talk. Each step they took was bringing them closer to a new life, like it or not. However, Lillya had made up her mind to make the best of it. *What else can I do?* she thought.

Chapter 16

The Vronsky Family Circus Stable, St. Petersburg, April 1886

“My dear, you’re quite a rider. I knew you were talented, but I didn’t realize you were better than I am,” laughed Petra. Lillya and Petra were returning the horses to Petra’s groom.

The groom spoke out, “You rode ‘em hard, Miss Petra. He’s going to need a good brushing today.” He winked at Lillya, “You didn’t have anything to do with this, did you?”

“No, I would never ride a horse so hard.”

“Oh no, not you,” the groom said with a smile.

Petra looked at Lillya and the groom and started to laugh. “I think, Ivan, there might be a new member to the circus one day soon.”

Ivan, besides being a groom by day and overseeing the stables, got to perform at night swallowing fire. Yes, he was the fire eater and loved learning new tricks, but he practiced those far away from the stables and simply talked to the horses about his accomplishments but never showed them what he could do.

Yuri’s Estate, April 1886

Lillya was flying as high as a kite when she got back home. She barely said hello to her father when she ran up the stairs about to burst, yelling for Natasha. “His mother’s amazing!”

“Calm down, Lillya, calm down. I’m certain she’s wonderful, but we have all night to discuss her.”

Lillya, with a sullen face, walked out terribly disappointed. Natasha didn’t seem to take her crush on Anton as seriously as she did.

Natasha was playing with the nightclothes in Lillya’s closet and was deliberately making a lot of noise to cover up the sound of Lillya’s happy voice. Lillya had been gone all day enjoying something while she had stayed home cleaning out the bathtub. She knew it was her duty, but when would that change?

In truth, Natasha had actually had quite a bit of fun while Lillya was out, but she didn’t want Lillya to know it. For a few moments it was better, Natasha thought, for Lillya to think that she had stayed home lonesome and bored, but it was far from the truth. Yuri wanted to surprise his daughter and had hired one of the best French seamstresses in all of St. Petersburg to make some new dresses for Lillya to take to France, and the seamstress had asked for one more fitting. Instead of bringing Lillya, her father brought Natasha.

The dressmaker, like anyone dealing with the upper crust of Russian society, spoke only in French to Yuri, assuming Natasha, a maid, would not know a word of the aristocratic language spoken amongst themselves, meant to help separate the working classes from the elite. Natasha smiled when Yuri winked at her, for with her photographic memory she had memorized all of Lillya's studies throughout the years, including her near perfect French.

For several hours Natasha could almost believe this was her life, that of a mistress and heiress instead of a handmaid. The dressmaker and Yuri left the room to discuss fabric and prices. Natasha caught a glimpse of herself in a large silver plate and gave her reflection a big smile of approval. Yuri returned with the fabric in his right hand but in his left hand he now carried a box filled with jewels.

You can pick one for yourself he told Natasha and one for Lillya. Out of loyalty and love, Yuri noticed she picked the nicest piece for his daughter

By the time dinner was through, both Lillya and Natasha had let go of their artificial disappointments in the other. Besides, Lillya would be leaving for France in one week's time. Natasha knew that she would be missing her best friend, and Lillya felt the same way, too.

Natasha was like her sister, and she couldn't imagine being without her for any length of time, but she couldn't get Anton off her mind. *He was so bold*, she thought. *He came to my father's home, asked me to meet him secretly and gave me a kiss.*

Without a mother to help raise his daughter, Lillya understood that her father had become more open-minded than many fathers. He wasn't trying to hold himself up as the finest example of Russian society. After all the sadness he had seen his wife endure, he wanted nothing more than happiness for his daughter. Educated by some of the best French teachers in all of St. Petersburg, she had been tutored and raised to fit into society, and therefore Natasha secretly believed, so had she.

He branded me with his lips, Lillya reflected on Anton. She couldn't get the feelings and what they meant off her mind nor wash them away. She wanted some distraction; she wanted some laughter and fun.

Natasha worried for Lillya because she could read the fearlessness and audacity in Lillya's sparkling green eyes, and they foreshadowed trouble. Lillya had no inkling of the dangers Natasha saw because she was of an age when nothing was taken too seriously, and life was little more than a game until it wasn't.

Yuri's estate, May 1886

The French had infiltrated Russia with their art, their dance, their drama and their food by now. Although the Russian's were getting stronger in their dance it was hard for anyone to beat out the French, but everyone tried.

Her father set up reservations on an ocean liner. Yuri's planned trip was suddenly in competition with young love, and he found himself describing the beauty of where they would be traveling as if he were a famous French painter wanting to entice a museum or a buyer. "One of the most famous chateaux in the valley is Chateau de la Chance. It sits on the bank of the Layon River and was built in the 11th century. Flowers and artichokes line the river, as do beautiful grape vines that are later pressed into some of my favorite wines."

"Mmmm," Lillya said with a big approving smile on her face. Yuri knew he would not have to work very hard for his daughter's approval on where they would be going and with whom they would be staying,

The difficulty would be in separating his daughter from Natasha and this new blood and excitement she found jiggling inside her bones. She could see that her father was even more excited than she to be taking this trip. It was the place he felt he belonged more than anyplace other than his

own home. He saw the land, its rich beauty and perfect soil, as a part of him. A part of his deepest self. It was in his blood, the marrow of his bones, and this connection acted like a carrier pigeon, programmed to always bring him home, and while Lillya's mother was still alive, she made him promise that he would never abandon their Russia and he would always do whatever was necessary to keep Lillya in Russia, steeped in Russian culture and heritage.

Lillya was overwhelmed by the stories of the beauty and largeness of these French castles her father described and the many others that had been built in this region. She had seen wealth before, but by the way her father described the natural passion and joy these people seemed to possess, they sounded magical.

The French had influence in Russia from art to architecture and became the standard bearers on what was considered good. So, any young Russian girl would be more than thrilled to experience the French culture and be able to say that she had walked the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and it was more beautiful than she could have imagined. Even though their destination would be Saumur, Yuri knew that he had to plan their transportation to include a short stay in Paris, too.

There were two ways of luxury travel between St. Petersburg and the Loire Valley, and Yuri decided he would indulge his daughter in both. They

would take a luxury suite in a steamship passing through the Baltic Sea, going around Denmark and eventually landing in the French Port of Bordeaux. There he would have a caravan of stagecoaches waiting to take them to their final destination of Saumur, home of the famed equestrian academy, the Cadre Noir. The return trip would be by first-class train coach with stops in Paris, Brussels and Berlin.

Chapter 17

Road to Kungur, June 1918 – Same day as Chapter 15

Out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning lit the sky and thunder shook the earth. She tried to think of what horrible deed had been done to make God so angry. She was certain it was a man's doing.

"We don't need this," Anton said out loud, seeming to try to make up for the mishaps of his gender as the rain fell like pennies from the sky in big circular drops that could have passed for cherries.

Lillya was upset because the rain was ruining the game that she had made up to keep her mind occupied. She liked to guess how many steps they had taken, since the last time she added them up, but for now the rain was rinsing them away. The footsteps had been witness to their journey and the rain was erasing the evidence of all her hard work. So instead, she found herself becoming transfixed by the sounds of the little bubbles that were popping underneath her feet as the rain made its way into the earth.

It felt childlike making up games like this, but she had to find a different way of dealing with time and learning patience along the way. Now the stakes were too high to be playing make-believe. The game board her father and the men of his generation had set up for them left no time for frivolity, this was life and death!

Anton knew he had no choice but to trust the plan that Lillya's father had set up for them with his cousin, Michael. By now they were in too deep and no one else, friends or relatives, seemed to owe her father a bigger favor, a favor of the magnitude they were asking. Walking in the rain, the sound of the little bubbles continued popping under her feet.

When Anton had estimated they were about an hour from Kungur and the church, Lillya reached into her bag and pulled out an old scarf to tie around her head. She'd be able to tuck her hair inside of it, covering up most of her gray and helping her to disguise her true identity. They started to see other travelers on the path going in the opposite direction. Lillya wondered why they were leaving but didn't dare try to venture into any sort of conversation or recognition more than a nod.

Testing his memory, Anton began to recite Yuri's instructions to the church. "You will go to the lower part of the town," her father continued. "On Kittarskaya Street is the Uspenskaya Church. My cousin Michael is friends with the parish priest." He repeated them over and over until finally the church came into view. Both became more cautious as they inched in closer to their final destination. Lillya grabbed her husband's hand, unable to anticipate what could happen next.

The congregation was chanting the Dismissal Hymn, a familiar song from Lillya's childhood. Lillya was about to whisper something to Anton when he put his finger to her mouth, signaling her to be quiet.

"Shhhh" he said to his wife. "We must stay very quiet, my love. Michael will find us."

Lillya bit her tongue. Anton motioned for her to stay put. He wanted to check out their surroundings. Lillya wasn't too pleased. Happily, Anton returned a few minutes later with news.

"There's a big bramble of blackberry bushes close by." He pointed to an old gardening shed. "I think that will provide some cover this time of day," he said after seeing a questioning look in Lillya's eyes.

"The hymn, the one they're singing, I sang it as a girl." She smiled, hoping to lighten the mood. "It was our closing hymn. No time to deliberate. I think we'd better get ready; the congregation will charge through that front door very soon."

Anton and Lillya found their way to the blackberry bramble by the shed.

"Do you think Michael will be here tonight?" Lillya asked.

“I don’t know, my love, but if not, he will have sent someone in his place. Don’t worry. He’s going to take very good care of you. Of that, I am sure!”

Anton had tried to keep his own questioning to himself, afraid that the power of doubt would prove him right.

“Anyway, there is no turning back.” Anton said softly. He noticed an old beggar out of the corner of his eye. The beggar nodded in recognition. Anton just ignored him.

Anton gave Lillya a peck on her cheek to assure her. “Everything’s going to be fine,” he whispered and squeezed her hand. Wanting in some way to acknowledge how far they had come, Lillya lightly kissed him on the lips.

Lillya’s and Anton’s intimacy did not stop the beggar from coming closer. The old man motioned to Anton, wanting them to move closer to him. But Anton and Lillya stayed put. For a second, Lillya drifted to thoughts of her son Vladimir. She wondered how many obstacles he had had to cross to make his new home. And for a second; for a minute would be too painful, she imagined her granddaughters, whom she had never had a chance to meet.

“How horrible,” Lillya thought, “that men and politics break up so many families by starting wars.” But when thinking of Vladimir, she felt a sense of satisfaction, for she believed they had done what was necessary to secure that he and his family were safe.

The people from the church scattered. A few went behind the church where Lillya and Anton were. Lillya heard some coughing from behind. She jumped and made a small jerky motion. Hoping no one noticed her, she turned only to see the beggar. Lillya decided to pay him no attention. Her sights were on someone else.

The parishioners out front of the church were seemingly starting to finish saying their goodbyes and a pain of fright mixed with abandonment kicked her in the belly. The beggar, the only one vying for their attention, became annoying.

Anton whispered into Lillya’s ear, “He might have had other things to do tonight. It’s not as if he was given a specific date of our arrival. He’s probably been outside this church the last three nights and decided to take a break and didn’t want to appear more religious than he is. Anton tried to reassure his wife. “We’ll wait a little longer, but if he doesn’t show up tonight, don’t lose faith, my dear. Your father would never put a plan in motion that involved your life without almost 100 percent certainty that it

would work out. If necessary, we will have to go back into the forest for one more night."

Anton could see the sadness on her face; the disappointment of no reward, when suddenly the parish priest approached them with the beggar at his side. Without wasting a breath, he introduced himself, then instructed the beggar to take over the reins of Anton and Lillya's horses and to follow him. All Lillya and Anton knew was that they needed to listen. The parish priest was the key to their future.

They walked down a dark and narrow dirt lane and eventually stopped in the back of a carriage house that looked like all the others they had passed, only this one had a small cross embedded in the wooden door. The priest directed them to enter the premises.

Lillya noticed a small lantern lit in the window and a strong green vine that was growing up the sides of the structure as if to frame the building like a painting. Lillya took a step back to take in the broader view. Upstairs looked to be a place where people could sleep and live and downstairs was clearly a place to rest their horses and belongings.

"We can talk inside," the priest said softly. "Pardon me, by the way, my name is Nikolai." Finally, Anton and Lillya knew the name of the parish priest.

“You will be quite comfortable here and out of the way,” the priest continued. “Still, always take the back road when you are coming and going. Your cousin Michael will come here in the morning with his wife Gretta and my wife Helena. His house is down the street, but you will be safer here, staying with me in our home,” he said directly to Anton. “No one would dare question or disturb the parish priest. Your husband will be known as my uncle,” he explained.

Lillya had not realized before now, seeing the priest in the soft lantern light, how young he was. “How brave is he,” she thought, “for helping his friend Michael’s family.”

“There are some clean blankets on the bed,” he said when they had climbed the steps and entered the door to what would be Anton and Lillya’s new home. It was small and simple, but clean and cozy, and it had one small window with a table and chair in front of it that would gather the southern light. Lillya smiled when she saw it. Anton, seeing Lillya happy, smiled too.

“There is fruit and bread and a hard piece of meat that you can cut. We weren’t quite certain when you’d arrive. Michael will be happy to receive this news. I will see you in the morning.” Anton thanked the priest, gave the beggar some change and went back upstairs to help his wife settle in.

Chapter 18

Yuri's Private Office, May 1886

"I'd like you to move and take Natasha with you." Yuri said to Sonya in confidence. "Lillya will be introduced to society when we return from France and Natasha is going to be, how can I say it, left behind. It will be difficult for both of them. I will arrange a job and a new home for you. I have a contact in Odessa, you'll like it there. Natasha has always loved the water."

"It's not going to be easy separating these two," said Natasha's mother. "Your daughter has been the best part of Natasha's life, but I'll do what you think is best because up to now you've been right all along. I thank you for your years of kindness and generosity.

The Estate of Sonya's employer, May 1886 – A few days later

Natasha threw a fit when she found out what was going to be happening; that she was going to be leaving the only home that she had ever known. She had just finished helping Lillya pack for her trip to France and said her goodbyes, and now this may have been their actual goodbye forever.

That morning, when she arrived at the house where her mother worked, she went along to the back door as she was always told she had to, and when they opened, she saw three suitcases. It was very confusing to Natasha. *Who would leave three suitcases at the door, and where would they be going?* She wondered to herself, imagining what it would be like to take a real trip. When her mother got to the door, she was dressed in a nice long dress that was olive green and double-breasted at the top with big, beautiful gold buttons. She gave her daughter a kiss, and instead of inviting her in, she told her to take one of the suitcases, that she was going to need help. This made no sense to Natasha, but she did it anyway.

Soon a carriage came up the long driveway to the main house where her mother had a room, and her mother looked at Natasha and told her to get into the carriage. “Where are we going and what do you have in mind?” Natasha started to feel a little frantic and disoriented, for nothing her mother was doing made sense. But her mother got a certain look on her face and Natasha could tell that she meant what she was about to say. “I’m leaving,” her mother said, “and you’re coming with me.” Natasha looked at her mother as if she were nuts. What did she mean by this? Her mother said, “It’s time for you and Lillya to be separated. It’s time for you to build your own life, and today’s the day we’re doing it.” Natasha had nothing of hers

packed and more than anything, emotionally, she couldn't imagine a life without Lillya in it day-to-day. They had been together since they were children. How could her mother yank her out like this?

The carriage moved quickly down the long gravel lane and at the end of the driveway was Yuri. He had packed up Natasha's other things and had them ready for Natasha's mother to pick up. He gave Natasha a kiss on both cheeks and told her she would always be looked after and she shouldn't worry, but today was the day that both she and Lillya had to grow up and accept each of their own stations in life and appreciate that they could no longer be associated in the way they had been.

"I know this is going to be difficult," Yuri said, "Lillya, I'm sure, is going to throw a fit when she comes home and finds you not there, but it needs to be done. I've got positions for both you and your mother in Odessa. You will be near the sea and well taken care of. Now, I don't want to prolong this because it will be painful for each of us. I appreciate what you have done for my daughter, but she needs to take up her new position in life and it's time for you to make progress in yours."

A baffled Natasha got back in the carriage and rode off. She couldn't hold back the tears that were streaming down her face. She couldn't have been more shocked. It was as if someone had blown her out of a cannon,

expecting her to find justice and a reason for their actions, and that they were expected to be okay by her and clearly, they were not. She started yelling at her mother, "How could you let this happen? How could you let him do this to us? Lillya's really going to be angry - he's going to be sorry. I thought he was my friend."

Her mother took her hand and slowly patted her head of hair, trying to calm her daughter down. She didn't like the situation any better than Natasha did, but she knew they were lucky to have a patron such as Yuri looking after them, and they had been given a position and enough money that they would survive. If they needed more, Natasha's mother was certain that Yuri would send it. So, Natasha went on to Odessa, heartbroken and sad, feeling betrayed by the one person she had most trusted in life. She had never thought about herself leaving; she assumed that she and Lillya would be bound together for life, but she understood now that Yuri had never meant it to be, that he had some idea about Natasha as a disposable employee that he was giving a generous pension to, an animal he was putting out to pasture or selling to another owner, not a daughter or sister to his daughter. He had a plan, but he hadn't thought through it quite completely, he hadn't taken hearts into account, and now the day had come for the life she had known to end and it would be time for her to plant new

seeds and discover who she was as an individual and what she was meant to do and see.

Odessa, May 1886

They got to the house that Yuri had bought for them. It was a simple but charming cottage near the Primorsky Stairs where just she and her mother could live. She had never done that before, her entire life she couldn't remember when she and her mother had actually been together for more than two or three days, but they were set up to take care of some children at a nearby house and at night they would come back to their own. Natasha cursed when she wasn't in the presence of her new masters. She made life as difficult as she could for her mother, hoping that she would change her mind and send Natasha back to the place where she was happy, but a week had passed and there was still no sign of her mother changing anything about their new situation and then two months, six months and a year, Natasha was still ranting and raving.

Lillya threw a fit as well, but it didn't last as long, for she had the distraction of the man she loved, Anton and her once in a lifetime trip to France. Her father told her that Natasha's mother had gotten a job in Odessa and was going to be leaving, and it was only right that her daughter was able

to come with her. He let Lillya know that he had checked out the situation to make certain it was safe and was one where both Natasha and her mother would thrive, because Lillya needed to have certainty that they would be alright.

Yuri wanted to believe that the decision he had made was one that would be best for both Lillya and Natasha and by convincing himself of this, he actually felt a little puffed-up, thinking he was quite smart and that he had done a good thing. He had taken care of Natasha most of her life and made certain that for a person of her station she had been given a bit of education and that she would have the tools to be worthy of good positions as an adult and in time would feel differently, but Natasha did not see it that way. She felt betrayed and she swore she would not get close to anyone else ever again because she never wanted to feel this kind of hurt again.

Chapter 19

Church Carriage House in Kungur, June 1918

Anton was already out taking care of the horses when two women approached the carriage house gently knocking on the door. “My name is Helena,” one said. “Nikolai is my husband, and I’ve brought you a few things for the house. With me is Gretta, your cousin Michael’s wife,” and with that Lillya smiled and opened the door. The women kissed Lillya on both cheeks as was the custom, and Lillya responded by introducing herself.

“Why, I would have recognized you anywhere,” Gretta smiled. Michael is right, an Englehardt wears their family crest on their face,” and the three women laughed. “We came to help you get settled in. I know it is not what you are used to, and last night had to be difficult and somewhat confusing, but we have all had to adjust to the times,” Gretta sighed.

“I also brought you some bergamot tea,” Helena smiled. “It’s our way of saying prayers for our country and the Tsar and his family and it reminds us of better days. And it’s our way of welcoming you.”

Gretta was tall and very striking-looking with thin lips and a long dark brown mane of wavy hair. Lillya was surprised how little gray she had for a woman of her age. Helena was much plainer, but pretty in her own way. Lillya’s eyes lit up the morning sky, which was beginning to change its

mood from blue gray to a crisp golden orange. Gretta pulled out some delicious-looking morning biscuits. Lillya caught the scent of fresh baked grains and the smell of cinnamon.

“You know, I met you as a child. I was younger than you are now. Michael, my Michael, had quite a crush on your mother. He thought the world of her. Yuri, your father, took it in stride. I think he was used to it. Oh, I’m sorry. I’m speaking to you as an adult woman forgetting that the mother is always the mother. Your mother was quite confusing. No one felt they could compete with her in any way. My husband made a fool of himself sometimes.”

“This is going to be a happy reunion,” Helena jumped in. Lillya smiled, wondering, though, how Michael’s wife really felt about taking such risks with their lives and then she began to think about all the secrets her father had obviously kept. *What secrets would his journal reveal about them all? This woman, Michael’s wife, was her cousin by marriage. Her proper name was Margaretta Villanova until she became an Englehardt. Could she be the key? What did she know?*

Lillya brightened, “I will boil some water for us. This wonderful black tea is a special treat.” Gretta chimed in, “Michael should be here soon I know Anton was anxious to meet us both.”

Older than Lillya, Gretta still maintained a good sense of humor and zest for life and love even though she, like Lillya, had lost much of what she'd thought would be hers. Lillya could see that these women might become new friends. Oh, how happy Lillya was to hear voices other than her own and Anton's. She loved her husband dearly, but she was in need of other companions and the sound of stories and laughter that only other people could bring with them. In return they could retell interesting stories and events their circus employees and entertainers had shared with them. Surely, they had enough interesting stories from the circus to last most people two lifetimes. Unfortunately, with strangers, that's what they would have to share, but who knew what the future would bring?

Both she and Anton needed to hear the sound of opinions even if it only gave them a source of conversation and debate for later, when they would find themselves alone at night. Tonight, they would gather in conversation. Perhaps one day soon they would even help her in their search for Natasha.

By the time Anton returned to the house, the women were chattering away. Anton, so happy that his wife was engaging animatedly in conversation, handed her a small bouquet of wildflowers that he had picked along the way back. The women were talking about a celebration they

wanted to have that evening. “I thought you might like these, my dear,” he said as he handed them to Lillya.

Anton and Nikolai began to store the goods they had collected, and the women slowly began turning the carriage house into a home.

Finally, Michael walked through the door, the main attraction as far as Lillya was concerned. Lillya found him to be surprisingly jubilant considering their situation. Not an ounce of fear on his face and no clue that he could be involved in a scheme of hiding dangerous aristocrats.

“Lillya,” he smiled, “it’s been too long and how is that father of yours? He was always my favorite relative. But then again, he was the one who won the heart of Angelika. Quite a feat. She truly was an angel on earth! Born to do things we couldn’t even understand.” Lillya tried to take it all in without showing her feelings. She gave him a brief, sad, recent history of her father and tried not to tear up too much.

“I like to think that he’s still at home, walking his horse, carrying a bottle of his favorite wine at his side, there with Stephano his houseman at hand to keep him company and to listen to his stories. But truthfully, I don’t know if he is alive or dead. Lillya welled up as if she were a ten-year-old girl and it greatly embarrassed her. “I believe the creaky sound of the old

wooden floor is helping to keep him company. And he's very good at having conversations with himself."

"But today is a joyous occasion and we must be grateful for these moments we have together," Michael said in deep reflection. "No one knows how many more we will have or what tomorrow will bring," he said while thinking of all of the friends he had lost but remembering why he had to remain in a grateful frame of mind.

"You are right, cousin. I promise not to be so solemn at dinner tonight," and with that Lillya gave him her best Englehardt smile.

Michael took her aside and spoke to her confidentially, "The parish priest, Nikolai, is a generous soul, but he has also been paid well for the task at hand. No one is truly safe these days, but I think you should be as comfortable here as anywhere else. Certainly, much safer than if you had stayed with your father. I hope you'll send my regards to him when the opportunity allows. He is a good man who has had to rise above much sadness, the illness of your mother, but you and I will talk about that another time. It upsets Gretta and right now you want her on your side."

Lillya didn't quite understand what her cousin meant. She took a deep breath. Although she had been waiting for this moment, she began to feel uncomfortable in her own skin.

Helena spoke up cheerily to the assembled group, “Nikolai and I have established a very loyal congregation, and he has told them that his uncle was coming to stay for a while, so people will welcome you with open arms and not apprehension, gossip or mystery.”

Lillya opened the windows to get some air inside the house and to blow away some of the intrigue and mystery. A nice swift breeze came through and sprinkled the scent of Kungur leather, leaving a reminder of where she was, on the tip of her nose.

“It’s been a long hard journey” Lillya finally said, “but I look forward to hearing stories about my mother. I was very young when she passed away. For now, though, I believe I need a nap.”

“I think we are going to have plenty of time to get to know one another.” Michael kissed her on both cheeks as did the priest’s wife and Gretta. He and Anton hugged a deeper hug than normal for they knew within this gesture they had made a promise to take care of one another’s family. A gesture from where there was no turning back. If one got caught aiding and abetting, the other one did, too.

Lillya wanted to feel worthy of the favor her father had asked. She felt quite sure that her father had already fulfilled his end of the request many

years prior, for he was not one to ask others for help. Except his houseman Stephano to whom he had been paying a lofty monthly sum and more.

What is the secret they are both keeping, Lillya wondered about her father and Michael. He must have something on her cousin equal in value. But what, she asked herself as she tossed and turned her way to sleep.

Chapter 20

Loire Valley, France, May 1886

The steamship was quite entertaining, but Lillya preferred land over sea. Her stomach gurgled constantly, and her father carried a bucket and walked beside her, but she enjoyed herself nonetheless and enjoyed daydreaming in her suite.

With each breath Lillya took, St. Petersburg seemed to be farther away and their house there, which had always been considered large, would soon feel small.

Lillya and her father arrived at the Chateau St. Jacque just as the women were finishing airing out the rooms one after another each more beautiful than the last. Exotic lanterns illuminated a tulip fresco of engraved flowers colored with a deep dripped oil of golden yellow that in its center almost looked orange. Tulips seemed to be in every room and everywhere on the grounds they were going to inhabit.

There was laughter echoing from the dining room when Lillya and her father arrived. Then two little boys who were playing tag and hide-and-seek using large marble statues and a giant marble vase to shield themselves came tromping in. They had no idea that their playground was at all unusual until

their father walked in and reminded them to mind their manners. “Silence!” he barked. “I promised your mother I’d teach you to behave.”

Yuri and Lillya found the situation funny. Sergei, the children’s father, had wanted to make a nice impression on the father and daughter who had come such a distance to rent the east wing of his chateau for the following few months. Still, he knew his boys had charm enough to win over any crowd, let alone that of a tired teenaged girl who had been cooped up on a ship for days, no matter how luxurious her suite was.

“What’s that dirt you have on the bottom of your pants and on your shirt?” their father asked. “I’m certain Sofiya will be quite disappointed – she put a lot of care into dressing you this morning.” But clearly the little boys carried no guilt or fear. Sergei winked at Sofiya as she entered the room.

Having heard Sergei, she chimed in, strengthening their father’s case. “Yes, your father’s right, you make me so sad that I could almost cry.” Sofiya exaggerated her movements and the tone of her voice to pretend she was quite serious.

Taking Sofiya seriously, Aleksi and his little brother Stassi apologized. And from this opening moment, Lillya knew that these two sweet boys would liven up her stay in France.

Lillya smiled and said hello, then followed her new handmaid Anika up the stairs where a bath had been drawn and was waiting for her. The water had been heated in big cauldrons over the fire and was mixed with ice cold creek water from behind the house to get just the right temperature. While she was bathing, Anika pulled out little sacks of lavender that she had made in anticipation of Lillya's arrival. After putting them in each of Lillya's drawers when she removed Lillya's clothing from each of her suitcases, she smiled with a look of great satisfaction, for this was the first step towards helping Lillya not only speak French but smell French like all the other girls in her class.

Lillya figured Anika was probably only ten years older than herself, and even in her work clothes you could see she had a nice figure. When speaking French, Anika's vocabulary and the way she put her words together – was far superior to her own facility with the language. Someone had taken the time to educate her, for she spoke English and Russian, too. Clearly Anika was more than a handmaid. "I could learn a few things from these French girls, especially this one," Lillya said to herself.

Lillya made it a part of her daily routine to ask Anika questions about herself, such as if she was married or had a boyfriend. And Anika made a point of teaching Lillya the finer points of escargot and duck cooked in plum

sauce, but mostly how to carry the scent of lavender wherever she went. At night, Anika put out a bowl of lavender and little bags to the side, for Lillya had become fond of making her own little bags, and if she didn't get around to it, Anika made certain there was one in each of Lillya's drawers when she woke up in the morning. "Now you'll smell like a real French girl," she would smile, and Lillya couldn't help but smile back.

Anika slowly introduced her to all of the different rooms in the house. One sitting room with a big oak desk and stained-glass windows was dedicated to the style of Peter Carl Fabergé, a Russian jeweler of French descent. The decorator, unable to replicate the exact working of this famous artist decided to make a wall clock and titled it "For Fabergé Time Will Tell It All". It reminded Lillya of St. Petersburg. *The east wing of the chateau,* thought Lillya, *is delightful. Father and I will live quite well here.*

Though many miles from home, Anton became the picture Lillya saw when she closed her eyes at night. *Anton had something special,* Lillya wrote Natasha, and she imagined the crowd cheering as he tossed plates into the air with each step he took. It sent chills down Lillya's spine, but Lillya had large ambitions of her own. She was a daring young woman, and boys sought out the chance to catch a glimpse of this special girl.

Anton cursed his parents privately for sending him away just as he was meeting the one girl that he thought could make him happy. There were many boys who had much more to offer than Anton Vronsky, as far as society was concerned, but Lillya's fear of heights when she saw him at the top of a rope made her want him more, for he had conquered her greatest fear.

Lillya and her father would be gone a long time, and she wondered if some other girl might capture his imagination in her absence. Natasha had assured her that that would be impossible. "There's no one more interesting or talented than you!" and she believed it, so Lillya did, too.

And then there was the food. Escargot and pheasant and later the pear tarts. How would she describe all of this to Natasha? Oh, how she wished she could have come, too. How would she explain the temperament of the people or why they serve so many courses in one meal? And breakfast, they call it petit déjeuner. Why, according to Papa, there is nothing small about it. *Oh, thought Lillya, it's so different!*

With all this beauty, these exquisite luxuries, and delicious foods, it doesn't seem to keep the people from getting high-strung and having passionate arguments in all their conversations right in the middle of dinner.

“Not because they are angry, but because they feel strongly about something,” her father explained.

“They seem to have an uncanny internal clock to tell when the raspberries and crème brûlée are about to be served, because they are always smiling by the time dessert is in the air,” her father continued. “They don’t seem to fight, really, they just value good, hearty conversation.”

There is much highly animated debate about everything from art and music to science and politics among these educated people, but Papa seems to be a pro at keeping up with this, she wrote in her first letter to Natasha from France. They love hearing him talk. I think some of it has to do with his Russian accent. He speaks French very well and is very well-versed in poetry and language which he likes to show off and throw in. I think he might be having too much fun already.

Sergei and his family have owned their chateau for several hundred years. He and his wife are letting me ride one of their prize horses for the duration of our stay. I can’t believe I have gone so long without talking about this beautiful stallion named Whisper. I’ve been told he was given his name because of the way he galloped down a path always quiet and smooth. I like the sound of this English word and its translation, too.

In the Loire Valley, you could actually smell the land as it flew off his hoofs. I'm going to explore some new trails with Papa and I'm sure I'm going to have many adventures while I'm here.

Lillya began to imagine what the next months might bring and the more she thought of the present, the smaller the past became. It's not that she loved Natasha a lesser amount, it was just that there were so many new things around her to think about and the culture was so different that she couldn't help but get engaged.

Yuri and his friends sat in the library and drank and played cards at night. Lillya was certain he was having a good time. *I wonder what kind of life he leads when we're asleep at night in St. Petersburg,*" she wrote Natasha. *"I think he's too handsome and probably too full of life to have kept to himself all these years. I wonder why I never gave him credit for being more than a father. To me he's just Papa. But for the first time, I'm seeing that he's more than that to others. And I guess it's only in this land of romance and passion that I can even think about my father in this way. It just makes me question everyone, even myself.*

Chapter 21

Kungur, June 1918

Lillya started to blink her eyes, but she wasn't quite ready to get up. She pulled her coat that had fallen off her during the night back on top of her. It was a cheap but warm coat her husband had bought for her before they left from one of the carneys who in return received a gift more than ten times the coats monetary value. The carney didn't ask Anton, why. He simply knew not to turn his back on a good deal.

When Lillya woke up the next morning after their grand welcoming celebration, thoughts of Perm and Natasha were floating in her head. She knew that for now it was best to keep those thoughts to herself. These people, whom she barely knew, were taking big risks in trying to keep her and her husband out of grave danger. She couldn't make any decisions without thinking of their welfare first.

However, when she closed her eyes later that afternoon, the voices of famous opera singers each reaching out with their mouths wide open, their tongues relaxed, were singing their favorite arias in the direction of the city of Perm where the relatively new Opera House lived. The trajectory of their voices rose over the fields of smiling sunflowers turning with the sun. Lillya

smiled back at them. They gave her a route in which to escape for several hours each day and music always brought her joy.

Lillya and Anton were welcomed by the congregation in Kungur in a friendly, quiet sort of way. No one wanted to get too close or ask too many questions. Everyone held the same belief, that the less they knew the better off they would be. There were limits they all had silently agreed upon and it was those limits that kept them safe. Less knowledge was the key to safety. And Lillya didn't mind, she actually appreciated having a little peace.

Anton, on the other hand, needed to keep himself busy, so he spent most of his days helping Nikolai do construction work for those unable to mend their houses themselves. Michael did not join them, instead he used age and money to get himself out of the work he still felt he was above, but he donated to the cause by buying many of the supplies they needed and overseeing the finances of the church.

On random afternoons though, he would come and spend time with Lillya. "Your mother had what they called a third eye. Did you know that? She could see inside other people by focusing on it, or at least that is what she told us, and it made our afternoons and evenings more entertaining. It could have just been a perfectly placed mole on her forehead, but your mother enjoyed being exotic, so we all believed it, because then it made our

knowing her more exotic, too. Your mother's family had an Indian woman as a caretaker and your mother loved to get lost in the many imaginative stories she shared. When she was eight, her parents took her to Thailand. She must have told you this story. All she could talk about when she returned home was how she rode an elephant whose name was Namaste."

"Yes, I do remember that story, for when I was six, she gave me a painting of an elephant she said looked just like the one that she had met. She swore it could have been Namaste's twin. My mother added a third eye to the painting of this elephant so that he could watch over me when she was no longer at home."

For a moment Lillya drifted some place far, far away in the past, but then she remembered her father's journal and the mystery she was trying to solve and knew she had work to do and she came back to life. Lillya understood, for she was targeted in a similar yet different way. Lillya had a mole on her back shaped like a heart, that always marked her as different and set her apart.

They had been in Kungur for about three weeks. Lillya was losing track. Now that they were in one spot, Anton quit making the marks on his stick to keep track of the days, and they were settling in. The three couples

spent most of their time together and liked to joke about that first awkward evening, their celebration, and getting to know one another. They recalled the table on which they dined had vases full of wildflowers, each vase more colorful than the one before it. Anton had made certain to pick only flowers that he thought would please his wife.

Michael brought with him their very best bottle of wine and a bottle of vodka he had been saving that had once lived in the cellar of the Tsar Nicholas I, Michael liked to think that its scent could make its way across the Ural Mountain range as the Tsar sat down to dinner with his wife and children. The thought of this, even for a fleeting moment, gave him hope that the world he had known still had some life. They toasted the Tsar and his family in soft tones to be certain the neighbors or anyone passing by could not hear them. He hoped that at least a whiff of its scent would somehow find its way across the Ural Mountain range to Ekaterinburg where Tsar Nicholas II and his family had been taken as prisoners. Michael liked to think that when he opened the bottle and toasted the Tsar and his family, that somehow the Tsar and his children would feel less alone. But everything had to have a sense of discretion, for fear of the unknown and what their neighbors really thought and believed.

Gretta brought a casserole with potatoes, carrots and chunks of good beef. Nikolai's wife made special cookies that were sweetened with honey and cinnamon and a hint of cardamom. Best of all, they brought to the party their true selves, which they felt safe to display. Even if it wasn't wise to do so, they needed to let go of their fear. The alcohol and the sweets had created a dreamlike quality, one that she hadn't experienced since leaving her father. They had had to wear worry as if it were an overcoat. She started to relax and said a silent prayer, recognizing how much better off they were from the majority of people, for there were many, many who were suffering. Nikolai and his wife did their best to be good hosts. It was hard to be discreet. This was a reunion, a special occasion.

There had been so much planning and preparation for Anton and Lillya's arrival that it was hard not to be giddy and full of laughter. A familiarity swept through the air. You would never have believed that they were just getting to know one another or get reacquainted. If you had passed by the carriage house that night, you would have thought they were exactly who they were portraying themselves to be, old friends and relatives.

Michael pulled out another bottle of wine. Lillya almost felt at home when she saw the label. Her father had that exact same bottle. She wondered if Michael knew it and was silently making a toast to him and St. Petersburg.

Just for that act alone, if the wrong person had seen it, it could probably have meant imprisonment. But instead of drinking the wine in hand-cut crystal glasses, they drank it in mugs that were used for cheap beer, then Michael quickly hid the empty bottle and pulled out an empty bottle of beer that could be lying on the table should someone unexpected appear. The more they drank, savoring these delicate tastes, the happier the clan became. For no one knew from one minute to the next what their life would be like, so they had to learn to appreciate every good moment that came and not take anything for granted.

The next morning, it was announced in the town square and all the churches that Tsar Nicholas II was dead. No more information was provided, but everyone knew that he had been killed by the Reds who were holding him captive. Their world had irrevocably changed. There was no longer any hope that things would return to the normal Russians had known for centuries. A deep sadness permeated the air, but they could only weep in private. Anton and Lillya prayed for the Tsar, his wife and children.

Chapter 22

Cadre Noir, Saumur, France, June 1886

Hervé Laurent Fleury was a plain sort of fellow who had worked all his life to make himself big. If he were given a lesson that would normally take two hours, he would take four to six hours of study to make certain when called upon his answer would be perfect. His dress was always impeccable, and he studied the dictionary so in conversation he could throw out a word or two to display his intelligence and aptitude.

Laurent, as most people called him, also loved horses and he worked just as hard to become a master at that as he did with everything else. When he wasn't studying to perfect his person or appearance, he was at the chateau of a captain at the Cadre Noir who had discovered this overachiever of a boy in an orphanage nearby and decided he would be a very good worker. There was never a son and fatherly relationship among the two, but a deep respect of each one's skill when it came to horses, and so the man kept Laurent on and clothed him and fed him and one day suddenly surprised him with a scholarship to the famed academy.

Laurent took this opportunity like he took everything else; seriously, and thus he rose in the ranks until it was clear that one day, he would equal his patron savior. However, one day while training the horses, his patron

savior had a heart attack and died, leaving Laurent nothing but himself and his position at the academy, for which he was grateful. Year after year, Laurent perfected his craft and showed a very bright future ahead of him. The only thing missing was love and a wife. Then one day, while riding in the woods near the creek, he saw a streak of lightning ride past him. Then he saw it ride past him again, in the opposite direction.

Not certain what it was, he planned to return to the exact same spot at the exact same time the following day just in case the mystery event would repeat itself once more. Being the kind of person who left little up to chance, he observed his surroundings like any good soldier would. He noted to his left stood a large tree that had been damaged in a recent storm and behind it a patch of beautiful wild roses that had found a home amongst the dandelions and brush. But the greatest impression of all was the scent of the flowers that lingered in the air and the sound of the water rushing behind him.

The next morning when he returned, a beautiful girl with flaming red hair and emerald eyes, dressed in gold and red silks standing upright on a horse's back flew past him with a gigantic smile on her face. She blew him a kiss. Laurent almost fell off his horse!

“She’s the most wondrous creature I’ve ever seen,” he moaned to himself. “I must meet her,” he exclaimed.

Having to work overtime, which for years had been no problem for him, that weekend Laurent sadly went to do his duty and fulfill his obligation at the academy. He had been given the job of showing yet another wealthy man around the academy. “Don’t they see enough horses?”

Laurent sighed to himself out of fear that if he didn’t return to that exact spot this morning the girl would think that he wasn’t interested, which could not have been further from the truth. Still, he took pride in his work and appearance for by now it was who he had become. But when the wealthy man arrived, a man from the academy approached Laurent to let him know that the man had brought his daughter. “He says she is very interested in riding, so you might need to slow your pace and cater it a bit toward her as I believe that is what would make this man happy.”

Just at that moment, a swirling girl dressed in yellow, gold, and red entered the stable with her father.

“This is Yuri Engelhardt and his daughter, Lillya.” The squint in Laurent’s eye, examining if what he was seeing was the truth, could have told one hundred tales. Every fantasy that he had ever had, seemed to come real when he saw this girl.

Laurent took several breaths, then escorted Yuri and Lillya into the menage where stood some of the most beautiful horses Lillya had ever seen - Thoroughbreds, Anglo-Arabians, Hanoverians and Selle Francais – variously muscular and wiry, warm and cold but never sluggish or timid. Although the cadet was very distinguished looking, he seemed a bit tongue-tied at first until he began to display the very French upper crust form of horse ballet of which he was a master.

Lillya's father whispered to her, telling her that very few horsemen around the world knew this special art as well as this cadet did. Laurent knew that this was his time to shine. The girl certainly would be captivated and would have difficulty keeping her eyes on anyone or anything else other than him. "Thank you, father," Lillya whispered back to Yuri. "Coming here has been worth it, if only for this."

Yuri, feeling quite pleased with himself, asked the cadet if he would like to come over to the chateau where they were staying and go riding with him and his daughter sometime soon.

Laurent could not believe how lucky he was to have been the one chosen to give Yuri and Lillya the tour, and he quickly obliged. The rest of the day, Laurent could do nothing but brag, which was not his usual custom.

“Did you see that girl?” he asked every cadet he could talk to. “She’s going to be my wife,” he repeated over and over.

Lillya, when she got back to the chateau, immediately ran to the stables of their neighbor and took out Whisper. “You are going to learn some special tricks this summer,” she smiled.

For the rest of the afternoon, until almost sunset, Lillya schooled the horse until Yuri made her come back inside. “I’m going to see Laurent, and you can’t say no, Papa.” And he knew she was right. “He’s going to teach me this secret art of horse ballet that very few men know. Just think what the aristocratic women will do when I show them this!” Yuri didn’t want to think about it because his daughter was a force to be reckoned with when she made up her mind. Lillya could barely contain her excitement.

She had first learned of the fine art of dressage four years earlier and had actually seen a master once with her father when he took her with him to pick out a horse. There was a Frenchman in St. Petersburg with a beautiful stallion the color of chestnut who had been taught this almost sacred art. Lillya knew how privileged she was to have been able to tag along with her father and she knew better than to pester him or his invitation would vanish as quickly as it had appeared.

“You will look, listen, and observe and be quiet,” her father said, “and nothing more. Are you able to do that? For several days before their visit, she practiced the art of silence, the most important and difficult one for her, and satisfied her father’s requirements. She was completely enthralled by the astonishingly delicate and precise command this rider had of his horse, and the trust the horse would put in his rider.

So, when the opportunity with Laurent came along, Lillya felt that she was more than ready to be schooled in this art and by this time she had become a masterful rider herself.

“Don’t get too serious with this Laurent,” her father said after several days. And then he reminded her that she was in France to perfect her French and to get to know lots of French girls and boys, not just one.

“Don’t worry, Papa. He doesn’t think of me in that way. Besides he’s very polite and has never tried to force himself on me.” But Yuri knew men and he knew that they didn’t always say what they truly thought.

“You know that I’ve gone to all the dances I’ve been invited to, and when I get home, I’m going to set my intentions on Anton Vronsky.” Lillya liked to get her father all riled up. But it was true for Lillya. Ever since meeting Anton, she could think of no future better or brighter than being in a circus, and she had never met a boy more exotic or kind.

“No, father, no worries about me staying in France or falling in love with Laurent. That would put me a sea and an ocean away from you and the man I will one day marry. I couldn’t bear being away from the two of you, let alone Natasha! I like him very well, but he’s not the one for me, you’ll see.” And she said goodnight, thinking about Anton while counting her horse’s steps because, if she could, she wanted to do this art as perfectly as Anton did his.

Chapter 23

Kungur, August 1918

Michael's work-shed, and the parish's, too, kept more than shovels and gardening tools. Sometimes Gretta would ask him what he was doing out there, and he would answer, "Just thinking of you, my dear."

Each spring, Michael planted a special flower to represent the qualities he found endearing and beautiful in his wife. How bright and shiny they made everything else appear around them. He had grown sunflowers that summer because of their beauty and openness, and how they seemed to always welcome anyone who looked at them.

Michael knew that bringing Lillya and Anton to Kungur would ultimately be hard on his wife, Gretta, but he owed this to Yuri. He was repaying an old debt, one long overdue. The couple's presence here, unbeknownst to the others, meant Gretta must find a way to be welcoming and generous even though it would cause her pain they could not know. Lillya and Anton quickly settled into their new lives in Kungur. Anton assisted the priest with construction tasks while Lillya caught up with Michael.

The three couples spent time together, drinking, playing games, singing, etc. Michael brought over a new deck of plain playing cards,

nothing fancy or prestigious like the Chas Goodall and Sons cards he and Yuri used to carry in their back pockets most everywhere. He thought it would help them pass the time while doing something fun and familiar. Seeing them, Anton couldn't help but reminisce about having taught his son Vladimir to play the games Preferans and Durak and how much he loved them. Many rainy-day afternoons of Vladimir's childhood had been spent playing cards with his father. Sometimes Lillya would join them. Those were happy times.

Anton's memories hung like clouds over his head. He missed his son terribly the eight years since they had sent him and their circus off to America. But as he laid out four queens, he reminded himself that all of those who fled Russia in time had been saved from this suffering! His queens, his granddaughters Ann Marie Heart, Spade, Diamond Claire and Lucky Club, his son Vladimir and his daughter-in-law, Bella were safe and did not have to deal with this craziness.

Lillya could see Anton going someplace far away and nudged him as they were in the middle of a game and not alone. She did not begrudge him these thoughts, though sometimes she was jealous. Anton could see the past so clearly at times she wished that she could jump inside his head and live there.

Gretta had brought over a pie that was filled with meat and vegetables that they would eat later. This was a time they had dedicated to fun and frivolity as the rest was mostly filled with work and worry. Even Nikolai joined them and played cards. He had deemed them a blessing as they helped to take his fears and worries and put them someplace merry. It was seldom that laughter was heard except during these special nights and hours. Why, just the day before Red sympathizers had come into the church and were notating the names of those who were praying. Nikolai pretended to be busy cleaning the altar and just nodded his head trying not to engage in conversation. This time it worked.

Lillya loved to see how each of them looked with a smile on their face. She could imagine them that way when they were young, how they must have looked in better days.

Lillya recognized that she had become a master of disguise. If her years had taught her anything, it was how to look like someone else. However, it wasn't so hard to do now as these days she barely recognized herself. When she saw her reflection in the nearby creek, hardship, time, and sadness stared back at her. They had taken their toll. The wrinkles on her face had dug in deeper and made a permanent home. She named the most pronounced ones after female mythological characters. One she dubbed

Athena, for her intelligence and wisdom, another Demeter, for her power over food and plants and her connection to the underworld. The deepest crease became Aphrodite, because it was her memories of love that sustained her. Accompanied by these goddesses and great determination, she found the strength each day to keep on living.

Lillya was a secret night owl. Most nights she stayed up late, long past the time Anton fell asleep, so she could sneak into her father's journal and learn more about him, his thoughts and their family. During the day she usually did things with Helena and Gretta. She was easily accepted by those she met, but she had disguised herself in this instance as a woman who spoke very little and was not very sociable with others. She had put up a fence the parishioners felt kept out everyone but Gretta and Helena. It's not that she didn't like the others or that they disliked her, she had built a wall around herself because she knew, if she started talking in easy conversation her disguise would be peeled away.

After a few months, she felt an odd sense of security. She found peace in not running. The familiar routine of each day wore her down and left her quiet. But the candle that had burned so brightly all these years now seemed dim and she was having trouble finding her way and figuring out what she still believed in. She wondered about her father. She imagined he had

become as fragile as a piece of old parchment paper, that if not carefully treated would crumble and vanish. Truthfully, in her heart she believed he was probably dead, for in a way, she had always thought it was her who kept him alive. She gave him his *raison de etre*².

Lillya did everything she could to keep her business at home and not to go out in search of anyone. She worked at making the cottage house comfortable, and the flowers Anton brought her each day helped. She only hoped he wasn't taking them from other people's gardens. She understood how important a particular flower might be to someone.

Lillya was dying for a fast stallion to ride, one that she could hoot and holler from and be truly free, but she let Anton represent them. After all, he had spent a lifetime entertaining people and was highly qualified. They kept their circus skills to themselves to protect their identities, not wanting to jar loose any memories, for lots of people went to the circus yearly and they knew Anton and Lillya's history.

Gretta stopped by most mornings with a special treat, and Lillya would unwrap the treat while Gretta watched her. She loved the way Lillya wore happiness on her face.

² Reason to exist

Gretta was finding it hard to dislike Lillya. They both loved music, and Gretta often came in the morning with her fiddle in hand. They would sing old Russian folk songs such as *Korobeiniki* to each other. Sometimes they discovered the harmonies in a song and that always brought them closer together, like it or not.

About once a week they would create competitions just to keep their brains active and to challenge the others. Nikolai's wife Helena usually could outpace all of them. One musical game was often played when all six of them were together. They put pieces of wood each marked with a letter of the alphabet into a bowl and every person would pull one out. Then their partner would be their secretary as they proceeded to name every song that they could think of whose title began with that letter. Whoever named the most got to choose which songs they would have to sing. So, then they sang and laughed and whoever got the most points got a bottle of Michael's finest vodka and if Michael and Gretta won, they would be owed a present from either Lillya or Helena that they had hand-stitched, such as a pretty wall hanging, initials on their socks, etc. There were always good presents to be had.

Lillya found Helena to be reliable and Gretta good entertainment and well-cultured. By the time Gretta and Helena left for the day, Lillya knew

she had about thirty minutes, if she hurried, to peek into her father's old journal, for soon Anton would be home. The one thing she valued during these days in Kungur was, yes, the company of these two women. She had been able to lay her worry out on the table and bake it into a pie or a cake and make something sweet out of something sour and distasteful.

Angelika was not always the angel she appeared to be, her father wrote, but at the time we met she was everything I wanted. She loved horses and animals, and it was clear she had the ability to tuck away her wilder side for the people and things she found to be important. I never dreamed she would get so sick, but how she loved our Lillya more than herself. Her world revolved around that child.

Lillya didn't read her father's journal in any sort of chronological order. Some days she read a portion from his memories of the past and other days she read a portion that he wrote while it was happening in the present tense. One day after Gretta and Helena left, she pulled up something quite unexpected.

Still there is something I need to share with her. We don't like to keep secrets from one another, and I have a big one that I am holding from her about my cousin Michael.

Chapter 24

Saumur, France, August 1886

Since coming to France, Lillya had gotten into the habit of borrowing their host's stallion every morning. She also got into the habit of seeing Laurent daily. She was surprised to discover in herself that there was something about the French that made her feel free and all warm inside and it wasn't just because she was living in the middle of a vineyard or that her father let her sip wine at meals as she watched the others drink by the carafe. Lillya felt French passion seemed to be a happier passion than the daunting sadness depicted in most Russian stories, paintings, music, dance and poems. It made her want to be freer, and sometimes with Laurent she found herself becoming someone else, a girl less shy and more expressive than the girl she had been all of her life.

Yes, she still rode like lightning and could light up the nighttime sky, and there were many from the opposite sex both old and young taken by her, but she had held herself back. When she was with Laurent, she could see in his eyes that he was falling deeply in love with her without telling her or expressing any words. Lillya began to frighten herself, for in this foreign world she was beginning to feel this way, too. Then one evening, as he helped her off her horse, his hands got tangled in the garlands in her hair and

as he gently pulled them out, he found his hands lightly touching her face and surprising not only her, he leaned in and kissed her. Then he pulled back and looked into her eyes and could see that she liked it and wanting her so badly he did it again, only this time for twice as long. “Will you be mine?” he asked her. “We can spend our lives riding through the breeze and dancing on the shore. I promise you will be happy for it is all that I want in this world.”

Lillya was shocked and excited at the same time. No man had ever spoken to her like a grown woman before. So enamored by the moment was she, she sighed, “Yes my love, yes, yes!” But by the time the second “Yes,” slipped off her tongue, Lillya could already feel the gravity of her actions and yet she was conflicted by how excited she felt inside. And Laurent, hearing her breathe and putting his hand on her chest to make certain that the pounding heartbeat was hers, went from a knight to becoming a king, for the young woman he just kissed could be nothing less than a queen.

When they left to part their separate ways home, he kissed her again; just long enough and hard enough to make her question herself and she left him dizzy and confused.

When she returned to the chateau, her handmaid could tell something was wrong just in the way Lillya was avoiding her father. She immediately

asked for a bath, almost demanded it, as if she wanted to wipe something off of her. The handmaid, trying to be nice to Lillya, instead made her cry.

“*Pourquoi pleurez-vous? Dites-moi*³,” she asked. And she spilled her story of her infatuation with Anton and her embarrassment of getting carried away with Laurent.

“How will I ever be able to explain this to the man I believe to be my true love? He pulled out this blue velvet box before I left, and he slipped it into my own pocket. I didn’t know what to do. It all happened so fast.” And Lillya began to cry even more.

“I’m afraid to open it myself. Will you stay here while I do?” and her handmaid nodded a yes reply with her head.

Unbeknownst to them both, Yuri had followed Lillya in, and when he could hear that she was upset, he stayed outside her door and listened to her as she cried her heart out. Wishing he could wrap his arms around her like he did when she was a little girl, instead he did the only thing he felt a good father could do. He walked next door, apologized for pulling Sergei from his dinner and they went into the library where they could have some privacy, and they talked father to father.

³ Why are you crying? Tell me

Yuri said not a word to Lillya and better than that, he asked no questions. He did what he felt he should do to not throw dirt on either the young man or his young daughter. But as the morning sun began to peep its head through the panes in Lillya's bedroom, a groggy headed young woman was put into a carriage with big feather pillows where she was served breakfast dumplings as her father said his goodbyes to Sergei and they pulled away as suddenly as they had arrived. Soon they would be in Paris and on a train to St. Petersburg as if they had never gone.

Lillya didn't train with Laurent again, but she remembered the many mornings and teachings he had so freely given. She pictured herself on top of Sergei's horse Whisper, and in her head went over the ballet step by step that Laurent had taught her, because even in her present state of mind, she was not so far gone to not see its value in her world.

On the long trip home, she reopened the box that Laurent had so gently put in her pocket several days before. She looked awkwardly at an ornate old emerald brooch and again read with discomfort the note. *To the flame of my life who sparkles brighter than the emerald in this brooch. May this always be yours and you be mine.*

Chapter 25

Kungur, August 1918

Lillya just about dropped the journal. Wanting to do nothing other than read this book, she was quite disappointed when she heard the sound of Nikolai's wife getting closer.

Nikolai's wife had been very kind and did everything she could to endear herself to Lillya and bait her into telling stories of the past. Lillya, wanting friendship and a conversation, became easy prey. She even told Helena about a boy she met in France when she was a girl and how he taught her the art of dressage and how that simple act of teacher and student changed her life, and that of the circus, too.

Lillya could hear Helena's footsteps getting closer. Lillya knew she had to tuck the journal away for now and hope it didn't get found between now and the next time she would have a chance to look at it. She found it interesting that the parish priest and his wife had put so much of their lives at stake for complete strangers. She was grateful, but still found it worrisome. "Don't priests do good deeds?" she asked herself, trying to figure out each person's motives. But as she read more of her father's journal, she began to realize that Michael didn't just like her mother, she was beginning to think he loved her mother and had hoped it would be himself who married her.

Lillya was beginning to believe that love was moving Michael forward, and after a while she understood the confusion that Gretta felt as she put it all together. *What motivated Helena, or did she just get pulled into this like an object in a storm that gets blown away and then has to make where they land their new home?*

Lillya quickly stuffed the journal in her bag. She wondered, too. She understood Michael wanting to help his cousin and his cousin's daughter, but she wasn't quite so certain of what drove Helena; wasn't so certain of her motives, and she felt horrible for having those thoughts about someone who'd been so good to her and was probably saving her life. Luckily that day, Helena had just come to drop off a shawl she had finished knitting. "I made this for you, Lillya. I found the perfect emerald green threads and yarn to put together something I think is perfect for you. It will keep you warm on chilly evenings and if it's too heavy to carry when you depart, you can just leave it here and we'll get it to you another time, in better times, I hope. Perhaps I'll be able to see that wonderful estate Michael has talked about so often and ride one of your stallions."

Lillya was taken aback by the shawl's beauty. Some of her favorite colors: teal, blood orange and yellow gold. Helena asked Lillya if she would want to go to the river with her. "I find it calming, and I am able to

daydream and imagine what it was like for us before all of this craziness. We don't have to stay long, just long enough to feel good and let the river run through our bodies." And they both laughed.

"Do you think that will happen before I die?" laughed Lillya.

She hadn't wandered too far away since they arrived. All those days of walking mile after mile had made her feet and legs sore from all the effort she had put out. But without Anton looking out for her, she was not confident in Helena's ability to provide safety, so she made up an excuse; that she was writing a journal of her escapades. "One day I will share these stories with you and maybe the world," she smiled. "Maybe another day. I love the water and how calm and free it makes me feel."

Helena left, but not before leaving a watermelon and a few pears behind, all prized gifts in Kungur. Lillya looked at the clock. She saw she had just a little more time to read and wanted to put it to good use, so back to her father's journal she went and this time she turned to a page at random. Surprisingly Michael's name was right at the top.

From Yuri's journal:

Michael might be getting himself into trouble.

Michael has met someone; a woman I should say, and he can't seem to get her out of his mind. He thinks about her all day every day. Angelika

says she can only bring complications and trouble to him and our family. She is upset with him, which he can hardly bear. It's Angelika's handmaid, and she says he's doing this to make her jealous. He's come up with tricks so he can find himself alone with this woman. I knew that it would not last so long, but you can't blame the girl wanting to better her situation. Today the woman told him she was pregnant. She's a smart one, too, she made a point of telling him in the place where she knew Angelika would be able to overhear their conversation. Of course, she knew Angelika couldn't leave her handmaid's fate and that of a baby's in only Michael's hands to figure out himself.

Angelika and Michael had always had a special bond, but Yuri had always believed that Michael did not deserve Angelika the way that he did. From the time they were children, Michael and Yuri had been thrown together, being close in age when they attended family functions and had remained competitive throughout their lives even when playing games. But in reality, nothing was ever really a game to them, it was always who could do it better. In Michael's eyes, Yuri had ultimately won the jackpot – the prize of all prizes. He had only been with this other woman to try to make Angelika jealous, but it hadn't worked.

He's my best friend, I can't not help him, Yuri wrote in his journal. *But how? What do I do to make things right for all involved?* But that seemed like an impossible mission.

The handmaid, Sonya Palitov, was sent to the house of another distant cousin in St. Petersburg where she stayed in hiding until she gave birth. Then they would deal with what would be done next. But when Angelika and Yuri saw the child for the first time, and when they held her in their arms and saw her sparkly eyes squinting and smiling back at them, and that Englehardt nose and chin, they knew this child had to be kept close. They couldn't betray the secret of her birth or who her birth parents were. It would have brought too much pain and embarrassment down on her and the rest of the family and she would have been mocked and teased and set up with bad marks before her little life began.

At least she should have a chance to make her own way without the burden of being a bastard. We held her in our arms and then Michael saw her too, it was clear we couldn't just give her to anyone. 'She's family,' Angelika reminded all of us. So, I found myself a key player right in the thick of their scheme; one that came out of good intentions but would one day blow up like a cannon in our faces. Angelika called it 'the best answer to a bad situation.'

I know Lillya, if you are reading this now, you are more than curious, you are also furious that I could have kept this from you for so long. I'm sorry, but I swore to your mother and your cousin Michael that I would never say a word. The baby's mother was set up in Perm where she was only expected to do light housework as she was nursing. When the little girl turned three, it was decided she would come to me, and I would be her unknown guardian and caretaker.

Although anxious and curious to see the name of this girl and to see if she knew her, all that Lillya had absorbed had left her very tired and as much as she wanted to continue, she found that she could not read another word. Tonight, what she wanted most was a good sleep. She had dug deep enough for one day. The rest would have to wait. Besides, if she did not come to bed soon, Anton would get worried.

Chapter 26

Returning by train from France, August 1886

Lillya saw the rest of France mostly from the window of the train. Her father had gathered her so quickly, she had no time to put her thoughts together. He had already made the decisions for her. All Lillya wanted was to be in the loving arms of her best friend, but she didn't know if she could face her. She had made so many mistakes. She worried, *what must Laurent think? I never meant to hurt him this way. How will I explain this to Anton when I get home, or get the words out to tell Natasha the truth?*

Lillya lay in solitude on the long, expensive journey back to St. Petersburg. She didn't know what to say and she wasn't interested in much of anything, even the wonderful food laid in front of her, not even her favorite desserts. Her father tried to bait her with profiteroles and Poire Belle Hélène, but even that was useless. He couldn't get that saddened look off her face. She carried a book with her everywhere and used it as a prop when she sat down so others would think she was occupied and unavailable for conversation. All day and night long she stared at the clouds or the passing landscapes absorbing nothing but her thoughts and her days in the Loire Valley and Laurent.

Yuri was disappointed that the trip of a lifetime he had planned for his daughter fell so flat. A steamship from St. Petersburg to Bordeaux and then on the way back, a first-class train with four days in Paris; museums and dining, the Champs-Elysées. Four days in Paris had turned into one. He had never seen his daughter so upset. His daughter was mixed-up and confused and Yuri blamed himself for not watching over her more carefully and getting too caught up in his own world.

Lillya cried, off and on, the entire way to St. Petersburg and upon her return Yuri had the difficult task of explaining that Natasha's mother had taken a new position in Odessa and Natasha had gone with her. He concealed his own role in this and had secretly burned the letters Natasha had sent to Lillya in France as well Lillya's own long letters to Natasha. He blamed the international postal service for her lack of a response from Natasha.

Would she ever see Natasha again? Lillya was furious and despairing. She accepted no visitors. She asked an old handmaid to draw her baths, one that she knew would never have the nerve to ask her questions about herself.

Then one day, when they had been home for a week, Lillya called no one and went into her closet and dressed herself. She then went to the stables alone and picked out the horse she thought would be best. She groomed and

primped the handsome stallion, was very meticulous with her actions and whispered to him the entire time. Soon the horse was rubbing his nose against her chest and making happy whinnying sounds. She did this three mornings in a row and by the end of the third day it was as if Lillya and the stallion had become forged as one. Everyone was interested but no one interfered with her ritual they just waited; her father, the maids, the stable boys all curious to see where it would go, what Lillya had in mind. “At least she’s doing something,” her father said to everyone. Anton, somewhat hurt by Lillya’s actions, felt as if he had been pushed aside and was puzzled. He gave no answer to Yuri’s comment, he just nodded.

Each morning, they waited to see what she would do next. On the fourth morning, she saddled the stallion her father called Bruno, the one she felt could listen and understand her wishes. By now they were bonded, and he was sensitive to her voice and movement. She grabbed his reins, jumped on the horse and asked the stable boy to open the gate. She gave the horse a swift kick and off they went.

Lillya told the horse all she had to say. She rode him hard and fast and soft and gentle, pouring out not only what was on her mind, but where she expected to go and what she hoped they would accomplish together. And when they returned to the stables, she brought the stallion back out to the

rink and she walked with him, letting him cool down as she continued talking to him in a low, calm voice. Later, she told Yuri that she was just explaining to him what they were going to do and what would be expected of him.

Yuri didn't want to imagine what could have occurred to have put Lillya in this state, but in this particular moment she seemed cool and at home with herself. Lillya knew what she was meant to do.

Her father Yuri told everyone to leave her alone. "She's fine. She's just in an inward state of mind making major life decisions. Everyone deserves that, don't you think? Let her be." And they all did.

Two weeks later, Lillya called to her father from outside the stable and asked him to join her. "Papa! I want to show you something!" Surprised by now to hear her voice asking for his attention, this caught him a little off guard. As he walked toward his daughter, he thought about how she had spent weeks hidden away in her room and at one point had gone to the extreme of having her food left by her door. She even drew her own bath and dried her own self off.

"I'm coming," Yuri replied. Suddenly, as Yuri got closer to the rink, a bell went off and things began to make sense. Intuitively, he knew what his daughter had been doing. Moments later he saw it with his own two eyes,

and what had started out as a small grin turned into a gigantic smile on his face. His daughter was sitting on top of Bruno, gracefully going through the horse ballet exercises that Laurent had taught her. Then she built upon them to do things Laurent could not have imagined – to a rhythm and stride of her own counting and concluded by commanding movements from the standing position. Who had ever seen or even imagined this!

Alone in the rink, Yuri started to clap and shout *bravo* and gave his daughter a rousing standing ovation that he realized she would soon have to get used to.

“My daughter is probably the only young woman in all of Russia who has mastered the secret art of dressage.” Yuri picked her up and swung her in his arms. The odd comment Lillya had made in France circled amid the thoughts that were now chirping in his head. *Can you imagine what the aristocratic ladies of St. Petersburg will do with this*, Lillya had said. And for the first time in a month, he saw his daughter happy and content.

Lillya suddenly had an appetite. “I’m starving!” She smiled. “Let’s go eat some breakfast.” She broke out in a huge Englehardt grin that practically took over her entire face and it reminded Yuri of his love and admiration for his daughter.

“That was an amazing trip that I will never forget,” she told her father.

“Do you think Agnes could draw me a bath?”

Chapter 27

Kungur, August 1918

From the journal, “*The baby was smart and alert and seemed to be able to mimic perfectly whatever Michael or I would do. Angelika also wanted the baby to be taken care of and not just given to anyone, so she approved of Michael letting this woman and her child live in our house in Perm until the baby got older. However, the more days she spent in our presence, the more attached we all became, and so I vowed to myself that I would set up a situation where the handmaid and this baby could remain together and with us. I don’t know how we came up with the name, I don’t remember what it meant to Michael or the handmaid, perhaps because she had been born in the Christmas season, but we began to call her Natasha. If ever my daughter Lillya reads this, she will be both angry and pleased at the same time, for her best friend is truly her cousin, but the child stands a chance at a better life if no one knows this, otherwise she would just be thought of as the bastard. If we had made this public simply for spite, Michael would have lost everything, especially his wife Gretta to whom at the time he was engaged. Gretta had already gone through the difficulty in accepting that her soon to be husband had always wished that Angelika was his. Now he had a child with her maid. In order to make peace and not cause*

a huge family scandal or bring shame on an innocent child, Michael asked me for a favor, and I could not say no!"

Lillya was shaken, almost going into spasms. Here she was, an older woman – a grandmother herself, and she had never known this. How could my father have done such a thing and not told me? That must be the secret my father's been keeping all these years! Lillya became so agitated she was like a hot air balloon full of extremely intense emotions and about to burst. She wanted to pick things up and break them, she was so angry. All the years she had spent with her father and Natasha and been kept completely in the dark. This was humiliating. *I wonder if Natasha knew?* she said to herself. *How could they have done this to me? How could they have done this to her? Propriety? What does that even mean? What sort of promises do you keep for a lie, and why? I hate them in this moment,* Lillya thought to herself. *Oh, this caste system has caused too much pain and suffering and is not of any use.* She tucked the journal back into her bag and cried herself to sleep until Anton came back to the carriage house later that same day.

Lillya and Anton spoke silently to each other as they had to address what Lillya had discovered. How were they going to deal with the truth about Natasha and her heritage? Right now, they both had to agree that Natasha was kept safer by not being associated with them. But, oh, how

Lillya wanted to scream, “She’s my cousin and she deserves much more!”

But did either of them deserve more? The Reds would disagree. If they had not, Lillya and Anton would not have to be hiding and fearful of their lives, their destiny, their future.

Sometimes, the Red sympathizers would find a way inside Nikolai’s church checking to see if he performed a service that was nonreligious and looked away from God. Then, by contrast, the men who believed and fought for the opposite side were fighting to hold onto their wealth while the other men’s families were starving. It was a complex time. The lines were formed and drawn. It seemed as if it should be easy to decide where one stood, but nothing was easy, because as they each gained a little something, they each lost as much as well. Lillya got shivers up and down her spine every time the Bolsheviks came to torment them, thinking that we were just followers of God and, if we had to choose between White and Red, Red would obviously be chosen. But Lillya didn’t really feel like they had a choice. They were all born into a certain lineage. It was frightening. Lillya would hear stories from friends about how one’s sister or brother had been kidnapped in the night and sent to the front lines, forced to battle their brothers or fathers on the other side. But the six of them kept on, the women by now were more like sisters – sisters who loved and argued. They didn’t necessarily agree with

one another all the time, but they knew to save themselves. Each of them was needed in their own way.

Chapter 28

Yuri's estate, October 1886

Lillya spent her time being very solitary those first months after she returned from France. Anton was beside himself with frustration. He had counted on a lot of things, but not this and not with Lillya. He wrote her notes and called upon her father asking if he might have the pleasure of her company. He hoped her father could be more persuasive, but he got the same answer as the rest of the boys and friends had gotten. Lillya, simply put, had her father tell everyone that she was engaged in a project that required all of her attention, but it would not last forever and to Anton she had her father add that she would be free soon and she looked forward to seeing him.

Finding it almost unbearable to have Lillya so close but at the same time so distant, Anton left flowers daily by her door and short notes to not take up too much of her time and he let her know how much he missed her. Still, as difficult as it was for him, he had been trained since childhood to be a patient man and his life in the circus taught him to count and breathe and sing his favorite songs over and over to calm himself, to keep his brain still and remain pointed on a single destination. It was how he made it to the other side when walking the high wire, and if it worked in that capacity it should work in every other, he assumed.

Lillya remained quiet for weeks. She believed if she wanted something badly enough, it would come to her. The only person she spoke to was her father and then only at breakfast and the rest of the day she whispered commands to her horse, determined to stay pointed. In the meantime, Anton focused on his long-term goal of proposing and marrying the most extraordinary girl he had ever met, Lillya. Yes, she was it for him!

Word began to spread. The secret Lillya had been perfecting was about to surface. Her timing seemed to be just right. She had stayed away long enough to be missed but not so long that she was forgotten.

This was the time of year when all girls of a certain class were waiting to be introduced to their future suitors and soon to be husbands and there was no one poised to make a bigger splash than Lillya.

Petra, Anton's mother, grew more respectful of Lillya and more curious as well. "This is one smart girl. I wonder what she is up to myself. I'm not certain if I did you a favor by introducing you, but I believe you will never be bored. She seems as if she could fit in anywhere. She will keep you on your toes, of that, I am sure. The girl knows what she wants. She's no ordinary girl," she told Anton. "So, you can't treat her like the others."

Petra encouraged Anton to invite Lillya to something she knew Lillya could not refuse, even if she wanted to. Something Petra could see was brewing in Lillya's soul and she decided to take full advantage.

Carl Magnus Hinne' who had created quite a fortune and was known to be rather extravagant had built a circus arena in St. Petersburg. Dmitri had been looking for another gifted rider and had hired someone on a recommendation from one of his cousins. At the last minute the man's wife decided she couldn't leave her family and now the circus was left with a cancelled starring act that would attract top dollar and no one to fill it, but Petra saw things differently.

"Dear Lillya, my family invites you to join us in the circus riding rink to display your skill for the world to see," signed Anton.

Lillya's father Yuri had been waiting and hoping that Lillya would share her letter with them, and this time she was too excited to keep it all to herself, and she did. "They've invited me into the circus." Lillya said as she came running towards them.

"With your permission." Lillya remembered that following her heart would take her where she was meant to be, but to get there she also had to defer to her father and ask for his permission.

Yuri knew he had no choice, he could see it was his daughter's destiny, and though anxious, he was actually thrilled that his daughter had an opportunity to pursue a dream.

St. Petersburg, March 1887

All of the aristocrats left the comfort of their palaces, wanting to get a glimpse of this daring young rider who had somehow been schooled in an art they were all dying to learn. The men didn't know what to do because no respectable man would ask a woman about anything important, especially about horses and riding. Of course, they had always considered themselves best, but there was no denying this girl was special and she had something they wanted. So, the men begged their wives in private to pursue lessons from Lillya in riding. They wanted their wives to get close to her, for Lillya was becoming a sensation. When Empress Maria invited her over to sip lemonade and play cards with her, it was the beginning of Lillya's own coronation.

Just as Lillya, at the Cadre Noir, intently watched Laurent practice his lessons, so did the aristocratic men of St. Petersburg watch their wives. The women had gotten more attention from their husbands than they could have imagined. They had the biggest smiles on their faces their aristocratic friends

had ever seen. If this young woman could get a crowd so excited by this, can you imagine what will happen when her secret gets loose.

It had all been done discreetly so the men could save face, but Yuri could see how differently aristocratic St. Petersburg reacted to his daughter. Even though they had been previously well-regarded, they were now part of an inner circle that before this they could never have dreamt to be in.

In the beginning, Anton believed he would not have a chance to be the one to court Lillya. He didn't believe that luck would be on his side this time around, but he was smitten and wasn't going to give up. Petra could read Lillya's interest in circus life, and encouraged her son to stay steady, as steady as he was walking the wire. "She'll come around, Anton, just give her time. It's you she wants to be with. There's no one else."

Before long, it seemed like everyone was chattering about Lillya and Anton. Slowly the other interested boys let go of their hold as it became clearer and clearer that despite their wealth and aristocratic good looks, Anton held the key to Lillya's passion.

The aristocratic ladies wanted to see Lillya and learn what they could, while keeping their husbands happy and proud, because by now the husbands had learned the art from their wives and the circus was no longer below their status. Even the Tsarina had given her nod of approval. So, the

aristocrats followed her to the circus, and they stayed for the entire show. Anton and his family, who were already famous, became more famous, while Lillya became an international sensation, and when he got down on one knee and proposed, the whole world was waiting to receive them, and in the present moment they felt like shooting stars.

But as her luck grew, bitterness in another began to take hold, for all that he had dreamed, and thought would come true had gone to someone else. His heart and his soul would never be the same. And as his bitterness grew and festered, it could not be moved or changed.

Chapter 29

Kungur, September 1918

Lillya remained secretive about her father's journal. It was clear that the stories it had to tell were written down for her and for her alone. Things at the carriage house got a little more comfortable and routine. The teapot's whistle had been heard and its steam was given a way out. Gretta, Lillya and Helena took walks most every day and actually discovered some joy and laughter in their getting to know one another. Helena was the most thoughtful of the three. She naturally thought of others first, but she was very watchful over what was hers and what she felt she deserved. They didn't broach the subject of Natasha very often. She was the off-limits part of their discussions and conversations. Actually, surprisingly enough to Lillya, Gretta ended up being the most curious, maybe because she had given up the most to stay married to her husband.

Every once in a while, Gretta would walk into a room that would fall silent upon her entering and she was rather certain that they were doing this not to hurt her, but to protect her. Then Helena would come over with a big pot of tea and some cardamom cookies and hope that her offering would bring about peace. Nikolai gave his prayers to his parishioners on a daily basis and though the climate in the country had gotten worse, no one seemed

to ask very much. Michael went on oblivious to anyone's feelings but his own. Lillya tried unsuccessfully to turn Sophie, the workhorse she and Anton had brought with them into a "circus" horse, missing her riding desperately and all that she had once been. Her personal sense of identity had become quite blurred.

Helena sometimes brought a new friend over to the house whose name was Lana. Lana, not knowing the wall that had been built between the other three, sometimes left them frozen. They found that Lana's natural innate freedom could not be shared by the others because a giant spider had trapped them in his web and left them wrapped in the lie that had started many years before; and it had become so twisted and ugly that like the fly struggling to escape the spider's trap every push and pull bound them ever more tightly to the life they had to let go of but could not. How would they get out of it? Lillya did not know. She approached Nikolai to encourage a private conversation, but when she did, she discovered a layer of anger that she previously had been unaware existed. It made her pull back, slightly recoil and lighten their conversation. In those brief moments, Lillya had decided Nikolai wasn't as safe as she had taken him to be. Suddenly the search for Natasha became that much more imperative.

Lana always brought laughter and fun with her, but she also came with a certain set of restrictions put upon the three other women. Lana's husband, Anton reminded Lillya, didn't wake up worried every morning that someone could take his wife for having been born into nobility, talent, beauty, and wealth. She was inconsequential and irrelevant to what was going on in her country, whereas Lillya represented an existence that caused men to fight and give up their lives.

Every once in a while, Anton needed to share a joke and laugh with his wife, add a little levity to their situation so she would know that the man she loved still existed. It was important to both of their well-beings for him to see her smile and that she see him smile, too. "It's not your fault," he often had to tell her. Then he would grab her hand as if they were still teens and together, they would go down to the creek and splash and play in the cold sparkly blue refreshing water. Their teeth chattering when they got out, they would grab a blanket and dry each other off. Anton would smile taking in the beauty of his wife and he would tell her over and over, "everything will be fine. You just washed away all your troubles and the fish have gobbled them up."

Lillya never quit loving Anton's attitude and spirit. He was her lifeline to the world, her rock and savior. The trip to the creek only allowed them

several minutes in the water, but Lillya cherished those moments as if they were dipped in gold. They were refreshing and helped to wash away her sorrows and past sins. Sometimes, they jokingly referred to it as their family's baptismal, for Lillya would swim over to Anton and tell her deepest secret of the day and he would gently and lovingly push her head back into the water to wash any bad thoughts she had away and she in turn would do the same for Anton. They wondered what Nikolai would think about them acting as the high priest and priestess of their own lives, but it was a way for them to feel clean not only in their bodies but in their thoughts.

Lillya and Anton worried sometimes that Nikolai might draw them into conversations that were better left unsaid. Cutting out just about everything that had meant something to her, her whole life before Kungur, was harder than Lillya had expected. She didn't know how to break free from her identity as what she had done had been what had colored her past and made her different. She was a flower lost in a dark forest, trying to find the last ray of sunlight that was the key to the entrance of what she had taken to be her life, but now this was real, this was her reality. She was no longer the girl standing upright on her horse or the one the aristocrats sought to teach them dressage. She wasn't sipping lemonade on the lawn of the Winter Palace with the empress, she was stuck in a small carriage house with the

same people day in and day out and she had to force herself sometimes to be grateful. Sometimes she repainted her image of herself inside herself so she could be someone else and find happiness and what was now the truth for her.

Helena felt sorry for her because she could only dream of the life that Lillya had led and even dreaming of it was more than she could imagine for herself. But the three women stuck together, took their daily walks, laughed at the same jokes over and over again, planted watermelon and artichokes in the summer, and saw the seasons pass from one to another. It had become boring, but it was a boredom they could live with and one they actually treasured because if it was not for this, Lillya felt quite certain, she would have joined the ranks of many of their friends.

Her mind wandered, wondering what had happened to many of the people that had gone to that last ball that she had attended with Anton. Where is the duchess now that so freely let the lord under her skirt or the others dancing, laughing and gorging their bodies with food, drink, and indiscriminate love? The Tsar and Tsarina tried their best to make the aristocrats realize that their indulgences were only going to hurt them, but that was more than the courtiers could see or want to see, and so they went on with their orgies and unrestrained behavior. This civil war between the

Reds, the Whites and everyone else who had gotten involved in this fight knew it was based in economics, power and wealth and the way out would be for each of them to be less greedy in all of the above, but Lillya knew it was impossible for any of these strong-headed men and women to come to the same conclusion, see the truth, wear it, and dare the consequences.

Chapter 30

Yuri's estate, and Vronsky Circus, March 1887

Out of respect, Lillya addressed her reply to Anton through Petra.

Dear Petra,

Please tell Anton I will come to the circus this Friday. I would be honored to ride with you in the rink that night. Would it be possible to schedule my performance after Anton does his, so I might watch? Thank you for this kind invitation. I will see you Friday at 5.

Word spread quickly and the Vronsky Family circus had to open an extra set of bleachers and two extra sections of special box seats, and they felt rather certain that they would still have trouble fitting everyone in, as a note had arrived saying the Tsar and Tsarina would also be attending. People were not going to miss something as exciting as this.

The Tsarina was already thinking about lessons for herself. Unbeknownst to Lillya, a career was being established before her first performance and a reputation was being built that would follow her the rest of her life.

Lillya whistled as she walked around her family's estate. She felt a little tight in her bones and had a sense that something bigger than what she

could imagine had begun. A big ball was rolling down a hill picking things up while still gathering speed.

Lillya's father was beside himself with excitement and couldn't wait for Lillya's performance. "What will she be up to next?" he wondered.

The soft low whisper that Lillya had been keeping private while perfecting this secret had suddenly become a roar. The courtiers at the palace were all very interested in what Lillya would wear, the ladies in waiting and the Tsarina drew their attention to her hands and her feet, for the empress knew that no one would dare try to out-dress her.

Lillya couldn't leave Yuri's estate until the early afternoon of the show. Word began to spread through St. Petersburg that she would perform that night, and Lillya was obsessed with figuring out the best costume she could wear. Once again, she preferred violet like the tulips that used to grow in her mother's garden. They could not fit everyone in. The best street performers lined the entrance hoping to catch the attention of the aristocrats who had begun to show their love of the art by hiring many of the same performers outside the building for their parties.

The circus in Russia, given the history of the country, was still rather new and people were working hard to demonstrate their worth and earn a high place in the thoughts of the dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies,

princes, and kings. That night Anton not only did his usual act, but he added something special, when he finished walking the wire he went to his platform, put on a clean bright white shirt and then walked to the other side upside down on his hands. When he got to the end, he put on a tuxedo jacket that was neatly pressed and waiting for him and finally took his bow. Then, with a flourish, he introduced his mother and Lillya.

The crowd roared for them both as they circled the ring doing acrobatic tricks. And although Lillya was capable of doing all the same tricks as Petra, she did not want to overshadow her in the show. She leapt to the ground and applauded Petra as she circled the rink standing upright on her horse's back. When Petra dismounted, she took Lillya's hand and brought her to the center of the rink and applauded her, then everyone in the building got up and bellowed their love of the two and when Anton joined them and gave Lillya a kiss on the cheek, she did not mind.

"This is the girl I am going to marry!" she whispered to Petra, but Petra and Lillya already knew this.

Yes, Anton had won the key to Lillya's passion, but one person was missing, the one friend she thought she could never live without, and it broke Lillya's heart in two.

St. Petersburg, April 1887

Lillya's reputation had preceded her to the riding rink. Was she really going to be the next sensation at the Palace, or was this just something that would last for hours? Neither she nor the people in attendance knew the answer. But the aristocratic women with the encouragement of their husbands, believed that she possessed the knowledge of the secret art form that they had been dying to learn. Now they had to figure out the best path to her stables and her riding rink without being conspicuous. The noble husbands would each come to Yuri and Lillya's house as if they just happened to have time to watch their spouses as Yuri's daughter gave them riding lessons.

Lillya did the usual stunts, taught the women the usual lessons of safety; how to ride with their English saddles and sidesaddles, how to exercise their thighs and push into the horse's ribs as they went up and down, trotting their way around the circle. As they improved, they would canter and jump low cavalettes maybe a foot and a half high or so, and when they finished cooling down in the rink, they would hold their horses' reins and bring them to the spot where the most important minutes of the lesson took place.

It was at the very end that she taught them the lessons of the horse ballet. She had two stallions that had become particularly schooled and were more likely to behave while Lillya worked, teaching the art of dressage. She would begin showing them how to develop the horse's engagement, their ability to work in degrees of self-carriage and collection – to respond fluidly to the rider's instruction delivered through the movements of their own bodies. She followed on to suppleness and straightness.

Are you sitting straight? In order for your horse to be straight, you must be straight... Practice your transitions 50 times a day... Feel how your horse responds...

The men were very discerning, and the women, it was the most fun that they had had with their husbands since courtship. Just as the men desired their wives, they desired learning this art equally as much and the women didn't care that their husbands were using them, for they got what they wanted. Their home was happier, and they were using less laudanum to calm themselves down.

Lillya and Anton rose to the heights of society and the Vronsky Family Circus soared and profited. The Tsar and Tsarina invited them to dine and lavished upon the circus two lions to complement the two tigers they had already sent. One was named Biscuit, the other Trudy; names they

had heard Americans calling one another. They all found it rather odd but accepted it without question because the lions would draw in a larger audience, and they came with a good story. They both knew that good stories are never lost on an open ear.

Chapter 31

Kungur, October 1918

Lillya said not a word about Natasha to either Gretta or Michael, but after a time she became clear as to the type of man her cousin truly was and who her father became as a result. A long-held bitterness festered in her 48-year-old body as she thought back to the missing element of her childhood. She had not needed to be raised as an only child when her own blood cousin lived in her home but was rendered invisible to avoid shame. Lillya began to hate herself for being the spoiled child she had been and for treating Natasha as the handmaid that she was but shouldn't have been.

She tried to go inside both her father and Michael's heads at the time, and then she remembered that she had to include her mother, for she was culpable, too. But when she thought of her mother, she knew her mother was the voice of compassion, and what they had done had saved Natasha being put in an uncomfortable position for life. This way no matter how difficult it was on Lillya; it enabled Natasha to be free.

Then one afternoon Gretta came to the carriage house to sew with Lillya and later they decided to take a walk. Before Gretta's arrival Lillya had been reading snippets of her father's journal and had not quite come out of that world when Gretta came knocking on her door.

For a little while, they laid down the pants and shirts that both Michael and Anton needed mended. Both pretended to have normal conversation but there was something that had come between them that neither had been able to speak about. After several hours of sewing, they prepared themselves for the outside, each more silent than normal.

Breathing the fresh air, Lillya opened her eyes wider, more awake and aware of her feelings. Gretta stared back at her with a look of longing, as if she had eaten her words and wanted to spit them out. Finally, she did.

“You know?” she said looking at Lillya as if she believed Lillya would be aware of what she meant when she said this, and Lillya did.

“Yes, I do,” Lillya said solemnly.

“And you have not told Michael this. Am I correct?”

“Yes, I have kept this to myself. I would say something, but I believe you know most of the story. I am sorry you have suffered so; it would bring anyone pain. It’s hard to imagine your forgiveness, but for me Natasha became the person besides my mother and father and Anton whom I loved most and counted on more than anyone else. She was my best friend, so my thoughts are mixed. Still, I want you to know I have sympathy for you though I don’t believe that is what you look for. I can’t tell you how I know this, but it has recently been brought to my attention and I assure you I was

shocked, but in a way, I wasn't. There has always been an unusually close bond between myself and Natasha and now I think I understand why. I think she might be in Perm, and I would like to try to find her, but I know that would open more wounds for everyone. So, I'm uncertain whether to be selfish or to leave things as they are."

Gretta responded, "We are grown now, you are a grandmother and Anton is a grandfather, but Michael and I are not and I'm not sure if the pain has lessened or if it will be worse."

"For now, I will keep it to myself," answered Lillya, and they continued their walk in the woods in silence listening to the animals and birds, talking to one another, trying to measure how they truly felt about the situation but unable to share their thoughts for the wound had just opened and was too new to know how they could live with it again.

For weeks after, Lillya felt like a train that had come to a halt and rusted over. She could barely move and when she did, she felt like an old piece of equipment that had lost its meaning and ability to do what it was brought on this earth to do.

Nikolai recognized the rift that had appeared in the carriage house, even though they continued playing cards and games in the evenings and told each other stories that made them laugh. There was this unanswered

question lingering before them, and at some point, they were going to have to answer it. Gretta kept more to herself. This was a painful subject for her, for the man that she loved and had planned to marry as a girl had already fathered a child with someone else. Even though, supposedly, no one knew that this had taken place, she knew, and she had carried this secret with her for decades. It had finally broken loose, and it was no longer hers alone to carry. Helena continued to try to be the peacemaker amongst the six of them, always with a smile, always trying to make the best of their situation.

The three couples continued to keep each other occupied but a sense of uncertainty seemed to linger in the air. No one seemed to be quite sure as to where they stood. Helena wanted to keep everyone happy. She laughed even at the smallest joke and always tried to bring something good to the table whether it be food or attitude. Anton just took it as the anxious feeling people get after being cooped up in a small space staring at the same walls having the exact same conversation night after night, not wanting to face the fact that they had come to a state of boredom brought on by their untruthfulness with one another. It was as if everything was stuck. But how could they break loose. Finally, Lillya opened her mouth and just blurted out, "I'm going to look for Natasha." Michael's face turned white with shock, Gretta's face turned red in anger and betrayal, Anton knew he would

stay by Lillya's side no matter what she did. Nikolai gave a look of seriousness knowing that Lillya's venture could lead to trouble for all, and Helena just stood there with a quizzical look, utterly confused not understanding what was happening. The secret that had been lingering and carried on the backs of family, loved ones and friends had gotten too heavy and there was now no turning back.

"When did you find out and how?" asked Michael. Silence struck the carriage house like a bolt of lightning.

Anton stood up surprised, wondering, *why is my wife talking like this.* Lillya looked at Anton with a face full of guilt.

"I'm sorry she said, but I made a promise, one that I can no longer keep."

"I don't understand," Anton said again.
"If you will be patient with me and just listen, the truth will be revealed," Lillya implored.

"Perhaps I should be the one who tells this story as I am the one that caused it," Michael intervened.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to leave," said Gretta. And she silently walked out the door, no goodbyes. She just put on her coat and left.

Lillya knew she had opened a vault that had been closed for years and in order to examine the contents, like the objects in a musty old box, the cobwebs would have to be blown away before anyone could see what was really there.

Helena turned to Nikolai hoping for some look of recognition, that he would have a clue as to what had just occurred, but he looked as unknowing as she. Lillya could see she was looking for an answer and broke in.

“To my knowledge,” she said, “he knows nothing.”

Michael broke in and began to speak. Lillya could tell by the look on his face that each breath he took caused more anguish and the pain just permeated his body and got deeper and deeper and went to the past, through all that had transited and what had been done and how he hadn’t seen his daughter since she was a young girl and how she had never known him as *father*. Then he looked at Lillya almost pleading for forgiveness. “I’m sorry,” he begged, “we did what we thought best” and he sat down on the chair next to him and didn’t say another word until Anton spoke.

“I hate to say this my darling,” Anton said to Lillya, “but in this political climate it is better that no one know, especially Natasha.”

Lillya in her heart had known this, but being so close to Natasha, being in Perm made it so difficult to accept. She so badly wanted her near

and to have one last opportunity to love her like a sister, or a cousin, and declare her as hers.

The truth was out. There was no more to say for now.

Michael looked at Nikolai and Helena. “I must be a big disappointment to you. We can all be guilty, but it is up to each of us to do what we can to correct our mistakes. It is not a time to be selfish, rather it is time to put one’s best foot forward and learn to become the person you’ve always hoped to become.”

And with that Michael walked out the door to try and find Gretta.

Chapter 32

St. Petersburg, September 1887

On the night of Anton and Lillya's wedding, people danced in the streets. What she wore was kept a secret. Many were told she wore her riding clothes and special leather pants that the Empress Maria had made for her that gave her more traction on the horse. They were married at the Trinity Cathedral and the service was attended by a wide variety of people from the world of the nobility and the circus including her 19-year old childhood playmate Nicki, the Tsarevich, who would become Nicholas II when his father, Alexander III passed away, but no one expected that to happen for decades.

Lillya's father Yuri was a Baron and that made Lillya a Baroness. As his only child, she was the sole heir to the family estate, farmlands and mines in the Urals.

Anton's family was also of the nobility. His great grandfather was a Count and the family had land and horses on the plains near Moscow. Dmitri's Grandfather was a champion horseman who really did run away with a small circus when he was young and his father, rather than dragging the boy back home, bought the circus and paid it to entertain him and the family. A few generations later the circus was known all across Russia and

each of the children gravitated to their respective passions. Dmitri was drawn to the high wire as was his son, Anton. His Aunt Olga flew on the trapeze and his Uncle Peter was a master clown.

Lillya and Anton unwrapped their many wedding presents, one more grand than the other. In some ways, it embarrassed Lillya to be surrounded by such grandeur, but the nobles didn't stop. They rewarded Lillya with horses and pieces of art from around the world and many fine bottles of wine and vodka that came from the Tsar himself, some of which she insisted on sharing with her father.

The following year, Lillya became pregnant with her first child, Vladimir, who was born in October 1888. He was a chubby baby born weighing more than ten pounds. Lillya was grateful for the strength in her legs and torso that had come from riding. As a toddler, he was slow to walk and loved crawling and hiding all over the house. When he did begin to walk, he would always fall down but then laugh it off without any crying or fear of pain or injury. The one time he did cry was when he walked under a table and bumped his head on it so hard that he got a lump that stayed with him for weeks.

At around four Vladimir began asking for a baby brother or sister. Lillya and Anton explained that they were asking God for one but there was

a long wait for boys and girls who could be in the circus. For now, he could play and go to school with the other children of circus families. This satisfied him but he would bring it up occasionally.

St. Petersburg, March 1890

One evening Lillya and Anton attended the new Tchaikovsky ballet *Sleeping Beauty*. They were joined in Dmitri and Petra's box at the Mariinsky Theater by Anton's friend, Pelé Petrovsky, a self-made millionaire who ran a textile spinnery named Petrovsky & Sutton. He was a tall, gentle, bear-like but dapper young chap in his early thirties. Like Anton, he had a keen interest in horse racing and raced about a dozen of his own horses.

To their surprise they saw the most exquisite young ballerina named Katya Sidorovskaya, the understudy for Carlotta Brianza in the role of Princess Aurora. Despite their initial disappointment at not seeing Brianza, all members of the audience were enchanted by this newcomer. Pelé was particularly entranced by her and asked Anton if he could introduce him to this heavenly creature. Of course, Anton was always welcome backstage at the ballet, so he took Pelé and Lillya down into the cellars of the theater and to the dressing rooms where the dancers were relaxing and changing. When

they arrived, they found Katya listening intently to the Ballet Master, Marius Petipa, an old friend of the family. Petipa greeted Anton warmly and introduced him to Katya, his new protégé, but Katya laughed – she had known Anton since the summer she performed in the circus pantomime and giggled endearingly about being paraded around the ring in a cart pulled by four dogs. Pelé was euphoric and soon Katya was joining them all for supper.

Katya was from Veliky Novgorod on the shores of Lake Ilman. Her father was a baker and her mother a dance teacher. She was the first Veliky Novgorod child to attend the Imperial Theatrical School. Her father beamed with delight at the news but especially her mother who had taught Katya how to move gracefully from the time of her first steps. Entire train cars of town residents came to St. Petersburg of the day she first appeared in the Corps de Ballet at the Mariinsky Theater, and they cheered raucously when she took her bow.

Pelé was the son of a carriage maker from nearby Luga. He was initially quite awkward in her company. Though only 17, she charmed him with her curiosity about his education and business. Her effervescence dazzled him, her humble, practical upbringing reassured him that she would not become a diva. Nonetheless, their courtship had to thread its way

between the demands of the ballet and the spinnery. He was ready to get married within weeks, but she had prepared too long to step away from the ballet just at the moment of her breakthrough.

The next September she danced in the role of Nikiya in a revival of *The Temple Maiden*, choreographed by its creator, Petipa himself. The reviews were wonderful, and Pelé had the good sense to celebrate her success with her while being patient about his romantic interest. Besides, he had a business to run and then he had to spend time with her mother and father and seven siblings all of whom came to visit during the week of her debut as a prima ballerina. Katya's mother loved him and was in awe of his beautiful townhouse and a spinnery that bore his own name – an amazing accomplishment for a man barely more than 30 and even more so, he was one that could admire his beloved as she basked in the glare of the spotlight.

The following spring, Pelé and Katya got married at the church of Saint Simon and Anna in an event attended by royalty of circus, dance, and commerce and as well as an appearance of actual royalty in the person of Tsarevitch Nicholas, who attended the reception and offered a toast for the newlyweds at the invitation of Lillya and Anton – left Pelé agape. *Who were these people, Pelé thought, who could bring along the future Tsar of Russia to his own wedding.*

After a honeymoon in London with a side trip to Pelé's old haunts in Manchester, Katya returned to the ballet for another season. She danced in that year with a power and grace she had not discovered before her marriage. Those days were short, however, as she became pregnant toward the end of their first year. Of course, she had to stop dancing, but she was quite joyful about the prospect of her first child. She vowed to return to the ballet but most of her peers doubted she would be back. Indeed, she was having the best possible life, and most would have traded places with her.

When Katya got pregnant Lillya shared time with her every day to monitor the changes in her body. Because Lillya had just been pregnant with Vladimir, who was still nursing, she was particularly appreciative of having the opportunity to act like a sister and mother figure to Katya. The baby was born on their estate attended by the best physicians and midwives in the city as had been the case with Lillya and Vladimir just three years earlier.

Katya gave birth to a beautiful girl that they named Donatalia. She seemed at first to be a delicate child but soon proved to be sturdy and even precocious. She walked early, sang and danced incessantly and adored her mother.

They hired a middle-aged woman named Madame Elena Strachkov to be Donatalia's nanny and to teach her French and piano. Madame Strachkov

was referred to them by Lillya who knew her family. She was unmarried, had grown up in St. Petersburg and been an accomplished teacher at a music conservatory before she suffered a riding accident and lost her left leg below the knee. The injury made it harder for her to get around and she sought a live-in nanny situation, and Pelé had more than enough rooms in his mansion. She soon became a family fixture and Katya depended upon her for everything having to do with Donatalia.

Her mother didn't want to push Donatalia into dance but as soon as her bare feet touched a hardwood floor, they sprang to life like a newborn fawn's in a meadow. She seemed sometimes to dance with fairies when she was alone and had acute senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch and it made one wonder what else. Generally, she was a quiet child and always seemed to have patience when it was needed.

Chapter 33

Carriage House, Kungur, November 1918

Then one night it happened. Anton and Nikolai were tending some of the parishioners; helping them with their chores, the ones that were too difficult for them to do themselves. Michael had stayed home that night, feeling too tired to do any more work, while Gretta and Helena had gone into the main house to check on yet another pie along with a stew filled with potatoes and leeks that they would eat later. Lillya thought that Anton and Nikolai had finished early and then she heard the footsteps of horses approaching. She was a little bit concerned because usually the two of them made more noise and would be talking and laughing yet this time she only heard the footsteps. The steps leading to the front door of the carriage house began to squeak and still there was no sound of talking and laughter.

Lillya froze and opened her mouth, but she was unable to get a sound out. She began to shake right at that moment. Three tall healthy young soldiers that clearly wore the colors of the Reds abruptly entered through the front door which had been left open. One of them looked like Arkady, a friend of Lana's and she didn't understand his intentions. Then he grabbed Lillya by the throat and covered her mouth with a rag. The youngest of the three men threw Lillya into a chair but then decided that questions were

better asked in private because clearly, she was waiting for someone to join her and it would be much easier to get the information they wanted to get from her if she were by herself rather than them having to fend off who knows what, how many, or how old. The only question that they asked was “How well do you ride? Can you still get that old body of yours on top of a horse or do we have to carry you or pull you in a trug?”

Lillya looked at them and realized she had no choice but to go along with what they said for if she screamed, she knew her Anton and Nikolai would come running to save her as would Gretta and Helena and maybe some unknowing parishioners. She knew she couldn’t do this to the others. For Anton it would be certain death, so she kept her mouth sewed tight and only did what they asked or said. Still, she had a pretty good idea as to where she would ultimately land, but she didn’t know what they would do in the meantime and how they would treat her along the way.

They took her horse but left the others that they found in the carriage house below. They knew that whoever the horses belonged to, they would come after them once they realized that Lillya was missing, but the horses that Lillya and Anton had been using were old workhorses that could not stand up to the stallions the soldiers were riding. As a matter of fact, they had Lillya ride on the back of one of their horses and eventually let the

workhorse run free on its own because it was only going to slow them down and put their own lives in danger. Lillya said not a word, for she knew why they had come and what they wanted. She was to be an example of those who did not stand with the people even if they did not stand with the Whites as well.

When Anton reached the house soon thereafter, Lillya heard the echo of his yells and could feel the pain in his heart. Her heart broke in two as she not only loved this man but had adored him for all these years and she didn't know what to do except to not draw attention to him and bring him closer to an ill fate because if the soldiers got to him it would most likely be the end of a love that had been nurtured for years and Lillya couldn't bear the thought of having done that to him.

Road to Petrograd, a few days later

They took her hands and tied them behind her and let her know in no uncertain way that she would be dead if she tried to get away. Though at first, she tried to fight, and bit one of the officers. Somehow, they had found out who she was and the family she came from – that her mother had been an aristocrat and her father the wealthy owner of a large estate and although her husband had owned the circus and they had all appreciated it when they

were young, they had to take a stand now and let them know what the challenge was. She wondered if Lana or one of the others had informed on her, but she knew she would never find out.

The next morning, Lillya woke up in a railroad freight car, her hands and feet in shackles and a soldier making tea for her and another prisoner. Funny thing, they made a tea out of bergamot. Lillya wanted to bring to their attention that bergamot was the tea of the Tsar and if they were fighting everything he represented, they should not like this tea. She kept asking what their decision was, and what they were going to do with her. She didn't ask about Anton because, if she was lucky, they didn't know about him.

Lillya could easily guess where she would be going. The closer they got, the more familiar the smells became. Even though the country was in the middle of a revolution, the water and the flowers still smelled the same. The familiar scent Lillya had grown up with and known since birth.

The men who captured her were tough, strong, and sturdy and let her know that they meant to do what they were doing. She represented her class; the class these men were determined to blow apart. She was frightened, but she kept her fear in place, for being afraid was not going to do any good for anyone. She knew that Anton had to be frantic; even if he was about to be sent to the front lines, he would be more afraid for Lillya than for himself.

She wished she knew where he was and what they might have planned, if anything, after all Anton was still a circus man.

Chapter 34

St. Petersburg, November 1894

Tsar Alexander III died unexpectedly of kidney disease. His son Nicholas II would take over leadership of the vast Russian empire when he was only 26. The young man's fiancé, Alexandra of Hesse and Rhine was a German. But this was not unusual, even Catherine the Great was a German royal bride when she first came to Russia and Alexander had already given it his blessing.

Since Nicholas and Lillya had been childhood playmates she could address him as Nicki. He had attended Anton and Lillya's wedding a few years earlier and so they were in turn invited to his wedding. It was decided that he should marry Alexandra known to them as Alix, soon after Alexander III's death in a relatively small ceremony in a chapel of the Winter Palace which took place on his mother's birthday because it was considered a joyful day and a wedding on that day would not be considered inappropriate during the period of mourning for the tsar.

For a wedding present Anton and Lillya gave Nicholas and Alexandra two beautiful golden Palominos – a colt and a filly that Anton had acquired from America through his circus connections. These were quite rare in Russia and the newlyweds both delighted in seeing them romp and chase

one another in their fields looking pale as ghosts among their bay, chestnut and black Orlov-Rostopchin Trotters and Arabians.

Their first child, the Grand Duchess Olga was born the following year and Lillya and Anton attended the christening. At the time, Vladimir was just turning six and would sometimes accompany his parents and the new royal parents and children on outings.

Moscow, May 1896

On her first trip to Moscow, Donatalia marveled at the marvelous onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral with their bold colors and unusual shapes, like delicious sugary decorations on a dessert or Christmas tree. What a stark contrast to the birthday cake shaped rectangular buildings of St. Petersburg in their monotonous pastel pink, green, yellow and blue. Peter the Great used only bricks and mortar to build his new city whereas Ivan the Great, or the Terrible if you prefer, was especially fond of onion domes and made them the signature of his capital.

Yuri, Anton and Lillya attended the coronation of Nicholas II at Dormition Cathedral inside the white brick Kremlin Fortress walls. Following the ceremony there was a large ceremonial procession which included the spectacular Life-Cossacks Regiment walking six abreast.

In the evening Nicholas invited Empress Alexandra to throw the switch on an enormous electrical illumination of the Ivan the Great Bell Tower and the massive Kremlin walls. The gathered thousands were dazzled by a display of electric lights that brought the brightness of midday to the evening sky, outlining the silhouette of the magnificent fortress in shimmering white light. Bursts of gold and red crossed the faces of the ancient majestic structures, and then all of it could be seen again reflecting off the Moskva River. It was more startling and transformative than any magic trick or religious ceremony. The throng of Russian humanity that saw this firsthand felt it was entering a new world, one that would resemble the kingdom of heaven.

A few had seen photos of the illumination of the Chicago World's Fair and there were some electric lights in St. Petersburg, but no one in Russia had ever been witness to something as overwhelmingly beautiful as this

Two days later, the Masked Ball was held at the Kremlin Palace, the first of many balls to take place that week. Anton attended dressed as an Ottoman Sultan with Lillya as his harem girl and Vladimir as his servant. Pelé came as a great Russian Bear; Katya was a svelte lady bear and

Donatalia a fluffy white cub with a scarlet bow. After enjoying the ball, the families returned to St. Petersburg, exhausted but thoroughly enchanted.

Madame Strachkov and her family stayed another day to attend a public celebration thrown by Archduke Sergei, then the governor of Moscow, at Khodynka Field, the very same place Nicholas' father Alexander III had used just 13 years earlier in the celebration of his own coronation. Offering free beer, food and a souvenir enamel cup containing gingerbread and a sausage. Perhaps because of the improved transportation system, the event drew a much larger crowd than anticipated – over a hundred thousand eager guests arrived by six in the morning and were to be watched over by only 1800 police.

For Madame Strachkov the scene had initially been exciting and celebratory but when rumors spread that there was not enough food and souvenirs for all. She waited behind as her cousins Fyodor and Anatoly began walking toward the tables where the gifts were to be given out.

But then all she could see was a panic taking place amidst the crowd and much screaming and shouting. The only one who returned was Fyodor. He tearfully told his family that they couldn't see anything in front of them except for the people's backs and then suddenly everything opened up ahead

of them. They saw tents, those from the which the gifts were to be given. They rejoiced but only for a moment. The way was open in front of them because they had come to a ravine and all who were in front of them were falling into it, then they felt a push from behind and then they were falling, too, falling onto people and then people were falling onto them, and they began to panic. They crawled up to their feet but under them they could only feel something soft – people!

Fyodor lost sight of Anatoly as people grabbed onto his arms and legs, and it took all his strength to shake off one then another and tread upon the struggling mass of people. When he got to the other side of the ravine, he turned to look for Anatoly, but he was nowhere to be seen. Fyodor screamed out his brother's name, but no one answered. He spent hours at the ravine, looking for him, hoping to rescue him, pulling out one person then another hoping against hope that Anatoly would be alive at the bottom of the pile but it was not to be. When Fyodor finally found him, his body was limp and silent and could not be revived. Crushed, suffocated, it didn't matter. He was gone.

They had no means of transporting his body home and had to leave him there to be buried in a common grave. The family gathered round him to

pray before his body was taken away for burial. Their return trip to St. Petersburg was filled with grieving rather than joy.

Nicholas heard about the tragedy and came to the site later that afternoon only to find it empty as the police had collected all the fallen bodies and sent the crowds away. His staff kept the worst details from him, and he was not fully apprised of the severity of the disaster. To his eternal regret, he attended a ball that evening at the French embassy and appeared to some onlookers to be indifferent to the cruel deaths of his subjects. This earned him the nickname “Nicholas the Bloody” – a moniker that would prove to be bitterly prescient.

Chapter 35

Nearing Petrograd, December 1918

As the freight train carrying her and hundreds of soldiers and horses neared the city, Lillya recognized the smell of Petrograd air, a mix of river, sea and the smoke of coal from factories and ships. She knew all along that the soldiers would eventually take her there. She was a symbol and nothing more, and she knew it. The men who were guarding her knew she had nothing more to offer the Bolsheviks than representing a trophy aristocrat.

The journey from Kungur had been more emotionally than physically exhausting as each step she took she knew would take her further away from Anton. Of this, she was very sad. She had been preparing herself for several years, so what was happening now was not such a big surprise. She knew the day would come and it would be more than a goodbye with her father or their old way of life. She agreed with the Reds on many levels for she could see the greediness of her own class and couldn't understand how they were unable to see that they were creating their own destruction.

She listened to the boys' conversations with one another. For that's what they were, simply boys. Boys who wanted to feel they had made their mark, made a difference in the way their people, the Russian workers and peasants, could live their lives. She wondered how their taking her was

going to make any difference to the world that these young soldiers wanted to create for their people, but right or wrong, she knew they had to do it, just to seek or believe they had sought justice for their own class, which had been punished by the nobles and they wanted the nobles to know that they had taken enough. Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky and all the others had set out to seek power for their fathers, brothers, mothers, friends and neighbors but the greed of their own hearts, she felt, was going to be their downfall just like the rest. She savored the air as it began to smell like her father's estate. She knew they couldn't be far from the center of the city and recognized that she would soon be in the company of many familiar people because the only place they could be taking her right now was Peter and Paul Prison.

"Pray for the martyrs of the revolution," she heard people saying and it got louder and louder the closer they got. Rumors of the Peter and Paul Fortress had spread across the country. It was the place where they took those that did not carry their beliefs, where many prisoners from the upper classes were jailed and humiliated to cut them down a notch or two. Ironically, it was located directly across from the Winter Palace where Lillya had once been celebrated and admired. In a strange way that fact gave her strength that she never expected, reminding her who she once was and still was inside. Listening to the soldier announcing their arrival, she had to

steady herself to take the next steps without showing the fear that she felt inside. She wasn't as calm as she tried to appear to be.

Click clock, click clock – she could hear the sounds of soldiers approaching. For a second the sound of the horses reminded her of all the wonderful equestrians she had met along the way in the circus and before. She even felt a little piece of Herve Laurent fly by her, and she wondered where he might be in the world and was he still the terrific horseman he had been.

It was easy right now to let her mind wander to circus days and wished she was able to have contact with her son Vladimir. She wondered how their circus was doing. Circus had grown up and the American circuses like the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus had really made a splash. Their own circus had been more about skill and athleticism than showing off large, tamed lions and tigers. In this moment, she had a sense of what those animals must have felt being held inside their cages, unable to run or escape or find a way out. In an indescribable way she felt as if she were doing penance for all the harm their animals had been through, not so much with their circus because Anton and his family had had very strict rules as to how the animals were to be handled, but suddenly she felt bad about the many homes they must have broken up, and she didn't understand

why she had never seen this before. She had always felt she was in a higher place in the animal kingdom and if she treated the animals with respect, she wasn't doing anything wrong. However, in a few moments she would be like all the rest. Her freedom was about to disappear. She did not know if she would ever see her family again or even the stars at night. She would have no one to rely on. She had never really been alone. Here she was an old lady, a grandmother she thought, and she had never had to fend for herself. She had always been given everything. Now she was like everyone else; she would be given the exact amount of food that the other prisoners were allotted and soon she believed she would be scrubbing toilets like the rest of them dressed in the same dirty garments, eating the same uncooked hard potato and hoping a scrap of bread would be left that she could use to barter.

Anton had sheltered Lillya from the streets and the people who roamed them. He didn't think or know that she had learned a lot about street life by just watching him. For the time being she would be unable to make her own choices, used as a symbol of what society couldn't accept, and really neither could she, but they were raised to believe that they were born with a place already designed where they would belong and be expected to follow undefined rules. It was a matter of luck as to how one would spend their life, what they could do and what they could become. She had no

choice but to be anything other than who she had been raised to be. She kept thinking of Anton. He had been born to be in the circus, not tied up in this mess with her. Nikolai and Helena she presumed would be alright and Michael would have bought himself and Gretta a way out. She was the one that they wanted, the one that would make a statement and if Michael could give them money, well, for now that would be enough.

When they arrived at the fortress grounds and took her from the cart, they blindfolded her. This was meant to incite fear in those that were brought to the prison and to satisfy the soldiers who sought justice for all that they had lost and given up.

This was the beginning of a new life for her. Her old life was scattered somewhere in the dirt that she was walking on, but her spirit was alive even though she didn't know where it belonged or where it would end up.

Chapter 36

St. Petersburg, September 1896

Lillya had taken a bad fall and the unborn child that she had been unaware of but that nonetheless was growing in her belly died. The doctor told Anton, "Thank goodness she gave you a boy before all this trouble."

Anton didn't know what to say or think. He loved his son, but he also knew he would have equally loved a little girl, especially if she were as pretty and sweet and talented as his Lillya. Anton was just happy he didn't have to make these decisions or uphold these ancient ridiculous rules of inheritance.

Cadre Noir, Saumur, France, October 1896

Lillya's notoriety had spread and though she could not imagine it crossing a continent, it did. Little did she know it had made its way to the Cadre Noir and into the ears of her once admirer who by now was so boiled over in anger he would have been unrecognizable to her. He had nothing but smiles and happy thoughts when she had known him as a girl, now he spit fire with most every word especially when news reached him that she had borne a little boy named Vladimir.

He thought about the gypsy woman in the woods that day long ago remembering how his body had been drenched in sweat and he had become delirious. “Did I let her make a curse or was it just a dream?” he often wondered, but then how could he explain the serpents skin resting next to him when he opened his eyes? That day had become such a blur in his mind that he had become unsure, so he washed it out of his thoughts as much as he could.

Still, whenever he came upon travelers who had been in St. Petersburg he wasn’t able to stop himself from asking if they had gone to the famed Vronsky Family Circus and had they seen the famous equestrian Lillya perform her act and when they said yes for a minute or two he imagined her as he had seen her that first day in the woods in the Loire Valley galloping standing upright on her horse’s back and he would be taken once again by her beauty and talent. Then reality would strike him again and he would start spitting out words of how Lillya wasn’t as good as she or the people thought. She, like that circus, was only an illusion. Then he would stomp off leaving whoever he had been talking to completely baffled and confused.

As Lillya and Anton’s child grew older Lillya’s first and only French boyfriend began hearing rumors of her boy, Vladimir. He followed in his father’s footsteps and became expert at walking the high wire. He was also

given the prestigious opportunity of attending the Imperial Theatrical School, one of the most famous schools of its kind in the world. All opportunities, Laurent felt, that should have been bestowed upon his son, the one he didn't have. But she would get what was due her, he always thought. And when a rumor came to him in the form of a secret note tucked under a silver tea pot with biscuits and flowers surrounding it and upon reading it, he thought justice had been served.

Chapter 37

Peter and Paul Prison, December 1918

When they opened the door to the cell block, the stench almost made her pass out. She could hear drops dripping from drains of one sort or another, but she didn't know where they were coming from.

She could feel the dampness in the cavernous stone walls that surrounded her when the jailer opened the door to a holding cell. Still blindfolded, she put her hands up and let the palms touch the stone. She wanted a better sense of her surroundings. She heard men and women mumbling, but she couldn't see who they were.

Stripped down by a female prison guard, she was put into a threadbare uniform and marched through long winding passageways. The little bit of food she had in her stomach started to rise to her mouth and she found herself bent over, letting out every ounce of bad meat, bread and pig's feet she had eaten along the way.

Men and women were calling out to her from behind iron gates and thick stone walls trying to figure out who the new prisoner could be. The guards encouraged other guards and prisoners to reach out and touch Lillya, but not hurt her. They had to be able to show her off first!

Fear rose in her body just as they wanted it to. She felt like a volcano about to erupt. Their goal was to intimidate her, and they did. Lillya wanted to cry but she refused to give them that satisfaction. She was going to have to be strong and it began here.

How can I be so close to home and have it all be so different? This is not the St. Petersburg I have known and loved. These are not the same people I have known and loved all my life.

Finally, they stopped at the end of a long hallway. The jailers talked amongst themselves for several minutes, then opened a small door, removed her shackles and blindfold and pushed her into a cell that was as dark as the blindfold when her eyes were covered.

She called out, “Is anybody home?” to show she had not lost her sense of humor entirely. Many voices answered back with questions and advice, but she didn’t want to speak any more. All the prisoners together made one sound, the bittersweet note that would ring in her ears for many days and weeks and months to come.

She didn’t want to give the soldiers the feeling that just by catching her, finding her, they had won the war between them. She stood very proudly with a sincere look upon her face to prove she was not afraid even if that wasn’t the truth. She was determined that she would make the best of a

horrible situation and find a way out, but she had no idea with whom or how it would take place.

The cell door was slammed and locked behind her and all the little noises she heard along the way seemed to echo and get louder and build to a cacophony; an orchestra of delusion and pain because everyone had their own idea as to who was to blame and what would be taken away and what would remain.

The next morning, she was served a small bowl of something - she didn't know what it was or what it could be. She didn't want to think about it; it certainly didn't come close by any means to Helena's cooking in Kungur or the biscuits Gretta would make her or the fish her husband would catch for her. Every once in a while, someone would yell out to let everyone else know they were still alive. Lillya had never been alone before. She had always had her father, Natasha and later of course Anton, and she felt very alone.

What did they plan to do with me? Lillya wondered. Her imagination was too vast, and she really didn't want to think of all the misfortunes they could have planned for her. Cleaning toilets, she could handle. It would be a joy, considering what else they may have had in mind. So, she spent her days locked up in a cell with ten minutes of exercise in dark, bitter cold.

She felt like a child once again, hiding in the stables of her father's estate in the dark, unable to see the invisible creatures that would frighten her later, as she tried to sleep, knowing that she could not

In the past, she had a house full of people whose job was to care for her. The strange man in the cell next to her was whispering and humming and to Lillya's ears sounded sorely out of tune. She wondered how long she was going to have to listen to this and she soon found out – all day.

Chapter 38

St. Petersburg, December 1896

One winter afternoon when their son and daughter made a snowman together, Pelé talked enthusiastically with Anton about asbestos and his factory's newly installed asbestos spinning and weaving equipment. This enabled him to produce thousands of yards of fire-resistant fabrics for theatrical curtains and fire fighting gear.

Anton was genuinely fascinated and asked Pelé for a tour of his plant. Pelé obliged and Anton was so impressed that he returned the favor by introducing him to Grand Duke Sergei who conceived of many uses of this cloth by the Imperial Russian navy. Heretofore, they got all their asbestos material from the Italians at a much higher price. Pelé was amazed by Anton's easy interactions with the royal family and extremely grateful for the introductions.

St. Petersburg, January 1897

On New Years Eve in the Orthodox calendar Pelé, Katya and Donatalia rode a sleigh pulled by their Orlov Trotter Chayka over the Neva to Lillya and Anton's townhouse. They ate a light supper of bilinis, caviar,

pickled herring, sliced radishes, pheasant, rabbit and all manner of desserts and they toasted the young Tsar at midnight with the finest champagne.

Lillya noticed the sweet interaction between the nine-year-old Vladimir and Donatalia who was just six and obviously adored him. Katya made a comment about the ice sculptures they'd seen from their sleigh and Anton regaled his guests with the story of the ice castle made by Empress Ann in 1740 to taunt her son Prince Michael for marrying an Italian Catholic.

"Good thing attitudes had changed," Lillya stated, her eyes flashing.
"Your own mother is a Catholic Italian, isn't she?"

Anton's mother Petra had been a star of the Venice circus and he would grow up speaking Russian spattered with Italian superlatives.

The story ended with Prince Michael and his mock bride, a Kalmyk hunchback no less, being forced to spend a night on a bed made of ice in a massive ice castle which made everyone shiver, especially Donatalia. Vladimir charmingly came to her aid with a story about his favorite clowns.

Later in the evening the adults played card games while Vladimir and Donatalia looked at a book of pictures of the circus including a watercolor of Lillya atop a magnificent horse named Pluto Gaetana who had been given to her by Alexander III.

Lillya invited Katya to follow her into her dressing rooms to try on a few gowns and look at some jewelry for an upcoming occasion. Of course, Pelé showered Katya with many beautiful things, but a young woman her age, a premiere dancer no less, never has a large enough wardrobe to wear something new to so many different occasions. Katya was a village girl and Lillya took great pleasure in treating her as though she was her niece or daughter. They often went shopping together and Lillya helped her pick out the best couture and jewelry to be had in St. Petersburg. They even made shopping trips to Moscow. They often exchanged gifts and on this particular evening Katya was looking through cases and cases of Lillya's jewelry and came across an emerald brooch that she thought would look very good with a gown her dressmaker had recently made for her. Gowns from a dressmaker were such a novelty to a girl whose only dresses had been handed down to her from a sister or two. She grinned with delight when she turned to show the brooch to Lillya but when she did Lillya nearly gasped. She knew this brooch lay among her other jewels, but she never wore it or took it out. She hesitated. What should she do with this? She didn't want to keep it. Her father had said that it was just a worthless bauble, and she shouldn't bother sending it back, that that would only lead to more communication with him, poor Laurent, who neither wanted to engage. Best to give it away or throw it

away and keep the story to herself. She felt sorry for Laurent, but now she had to forget about him completely.

“Yes, of course. Take it, you can have it,” she found herself saying. Katya screamed with delight and hugged Lillya. *What harm could it do*, she thought.

Chapter 39

Peter and Paul Prison, December 1918

Lillya, following Anton's lead, tallied the days she had been in the prison on the wooden leg of her narrow cot. And she had dreams. She wondered if her horse was still in the pasture, whether their gardener or caretaker or her father's companion had stayed on, would he have been able to? She wondered who was still living and who was dead. Most of all, she hoped there were others in hiding like herself, or had they been unable to give up their obsession with always being noticed because this time it would not have a pleasant ending. How many people were living on their estate and who were they? All these thoughts filled her days.

In the far-left cell from where she was placed, an old gypsy woman was singing a song about love and pain. As sorrowful as her voice could become, she continued on. Lillya found herself secretly admiring her because she told the truth and shared her feelings. Gypsies were not very well-received most anywhere, but in this case, the Reds had jailed and punished them the same way they had their aristocrats.

Lillya was later to find out the woman's name was Rosa. Rosa was curious about Lillya, for she appeared different from the many other aristocrats Rosa had come in contact with. Even in this darkened state, Lillya

had more of a feeling for life than the others, who just took their imprisonment as defeat. Rosa kept to herself when the prisoners would walk in sets of ten at different times in the middle of the prison.

Lillya thought about Peter the Great, and wondered how he would feel about his fortress being used in such a way. She steered her mind away from things that she couldn't control, but instead focused on seeking relationships that she might develop and use to find a way out of there.

Lillya did everything she could to keep from vomiting up what little was left in her stomach. Not even a thin mattress could be found, and the officers spat on her. She didn't think her cell could get any darker, but then night came. The solitude was the worst of all. Lillya knew she was alone; she just didn't know how many years, months, days, hours, that would be true for her.

Then she heard a dark, deep voice, "I can see you've never been here before." Afraid to be silent, but more afraid to talk, she curled her body on the bare wooden cot, hoping not to make any noise, thinking that if she was very quiet, he would think she was no longer awake. She knew her thoughts were not rational, but she didn't want to believe her situation and the man on the other side of the wall continued, "I heard you were coming. You have no worries. We may not eat so well, and the boys can be a little rough, but they

don't put you in the same category as some of the others. You're lucky your husband owns a circus. Who does not have happy thoughts of visiting it as a child? I myself ran away once, wanting to join the circus."

Lillya shivered in her corner and did not say a word. He could be a plant for all she knew, and then where would that lead her? "Don't be afraid of me," the man continued. "You have to trust someone within these walls." Lillya tried to shut out the voice. She didn't want to hear what he had to say. It was too much for her to take all in one breath. A shiver went up her spine.

Cupping her hands over her ears, she tried to cut out the noise of both the drops from the pipes and the stranger who seemed to be in the cell next to hers. She was afraid, but she didn't want to admit it. She had to be strong now, but this time for herself alone. She could think of no one else at the moment – her friends and family in Kungur would all have to be doing the same, if they were lucky enough to still be alive.

She started to imagine, in the dark, herself riding her father's stallion, the wind in her hair once more, reminding her how strong she had always been and how brave she was now in this present moment. Being in prison was certainly an obstacle and not a pleasant experience, but she had things yet to accomplish, people she needed to see – Natasha still being the main one.

But now she was mostly curious as to what her own routine would become and how she would live day-to-day – what they would feed her and how bad they would treat her.

The strange man in the cell next to her continued whistling horrible songs, humming out tunes and just didn't stop. If the Reds wanted to torture someone, Lillya was certain they had found the way. But these men believed that her station at birth gave them the right to punish her. It didn't matter who she was, what she was like, or what she had done - just being born into the upper class made her fair game. For days, she was just getting acclimated to the present. The past made her too sad to think about, and the future seemed impossible. Every once in a while, Lillya thought she recognized a familiar face - someone whom she may even have seen in the ball at the Winter Palace. That seemed lifetimes past but was only about two years ago.

Chapter 40

St. Petersburg, June 1897

Pelé Petrovsky loved large, pulsating machines and powerful engines. His passion rivaled that of Lillya for her beloved horses and Katya for the ballet. He was the son of a carriage maker from a village halfway to Moscow who demonstrated a remarkable talent for tinkering in his early childhood. He was famous for fixing any machine that could be handed to him and by the age of 20 he was acknowledged to be the finest mechanical engineer St. Petersburg University had produced in decades.

His fascination with fabrics and textile machinery had taken him to Manchester, England also known as *Cottonopolis* where he learned about the latest cotton spinning machines from the men that built them. While there he perfected his English and made the acquaintance of Archie Sutton and many other future colleagues, customers and investors.

Pelé was making elaborate plans to expand his business, the Petrovsky & Sutton Spinnery, into the premiere textile manufacturer in Russia – it already rivaled the best in Moscow. He'd invited his English business partner Archie Sutton and his wife Winifred to dinner that evening, and they would be bringing along with them an American cotton grower from Savannah, Georgia named George Bradley and his wife Mary.

Brady's land produced some of America's finest Sea Island cotton – a rare long staple cotton with a silky and radiant white fiber. If he could secure a long-term deal for Bradley's cotton, he would gain a great advantage in the European market where fabrics made from this cotton sold for a very high premium. And, to top it all off, there was even evidence of large deposits of chrysotile or white asbestos on his properties in the mountains of northwestern South Carolina.

The potential profits made Pelé and Archie's mouths water and eyes bulge. They hoped that giving George and Mary the royal treatment and a large advance would seal the contract. The Bradley's were spending the summer in St. Petersburg and Katya had already had Mary and their young daughter Rosie over to tea and card games. Donatalia got along well with Rosie, and they enjoyed playing in the garden. Mary made an impression on Donatalia as an especially kind and generous person.

It was six o'clock and Pelé paced impatiently expecting his wife to return in time to greet their expected guests. Only a few hours earlier, he had bickered with her about staying home to prepare for their guests, but she dismissed his concerns, saying the staff was quite capable of setting the table and preparing the dinner, after all she had spent the day before shopping for flowers and pastries. They had everything they needed and now she planned

to join Lillya and a couple of old friends from the circus for an afternoon of tea and card games at Yuri's townhouse.

The effervescent giggling gaggle of ladies had just finished their game of Preferens when Katya complained of a "tummy ache" and politely asked to leave before the serving of even more tea and delicate pastries. As Katya's carriage driver brought round their barouche she was trembling, pale and feverish. Lillya suggested a remedy and offered to call her own doctor, but Katya dismissed all that as unnecessary.

When his doorbell rang, Pelé assumed it would be their guests, and he sighed in exasperation. Mme Strachkov answered the door, but instead of the Sutton's and Bradley's she was met by two police officers. She could see Katya's driver Alexi behind them shaking and looking guilty. Pelé was called to the door but immediately grew furious, certain the driver had been involved in some kind of traffic mishap but before he could grill Alexi one of the officers politely informed him that his wife Katya had died of a burst appendix. Alexi had urgently driven her to Mariinsky Hospital, but she passed away in the emergency room. There was nothing that could have been done. The officers asked Pelé to come to the hospital to identify her body and make arrangements with an undertaker. He was stunned and couldn't believe it was true until Alexi broke down crying in front of them

because he hadn't been able to get through traffic and believed he himself was responsible for Katya's death. Pelé and the police did their best to console him but then Pelé himself broke into tears at the sight of Katya's coat and scarf.

Donatalia's piano teacher, Madame Strachkov, was asked to explain what happened to their guests when they arrived. Pelé hurriedly told the bewildered Donatalia that her mother's appendix had burst to which she could only respond, "What is an appendix?"

The following day Lillya called to find out if Katya was alright and Pelé told her the bad news. Lillya came over immediately to offer her sympathy and support to Pelé and Donatalia. Lillya took a special interest in Donatalia because now they both knew the pain of having their mother die when they were just children.

St. Petersburg, September 1897

A few months later, the Bradley's and Sutton's came again for dinner and to close the deal that would bring the Bradley's fine Sea Island cotton exclusively to the Petrovsky & Sutton Spinnery. *Even now, Pelé boasted, their Egyptian cotton was made into the finest shirts, sheets and dresses in St. Petersburg and astute buyers looked for the Petrovsky & Sutton label.* At

the same time, Archie Sutton cautioned his bear-like partner Petrovsky about the risks of having underpaid and dissatisfied workers, imploring him to make concessions to avoid strikes and disputes. Pelé, however, dismissed these concerns saying that Archie didn't understand Russian business. If he raised wages all the other factory owners would savage him because their workers would strike and they would be forced to raise their wages and then the whole system would collapse. "Trust me," he said. He understood the Russian working class and he knew how to handle the troublemakers that were threatening to disrupt production.

Chapter 41

Peter and Paul Prison, June 1919

When she first got to the prison, she imitated Anton's method from their journey to Kungur by making marks on her prison cot so she might know what date it was and how long something had actually taken her, but after a while she forgot to make the mark or wondered if she had made it twice and she lost track of the days and finally just gave up caring about the date altogether and only recognized the seasons and the moon changing in the sky. What did one day mean over another? She found it useless, and that frightened her because she didn't care.

Sometimes prisoners would put out a stick to see if they could trip someone just for their own entertainment. Lillya felt it cruel and unnecessary. She didn't expect to be having fun in prison; she expected to find a way out but had no clue as to how to make that happen. Then one afternoon in the prison yard near the end of her time allowed outside, she noticed a woman staring at her, one of the guards. She couldn't figure out what the woman wanted, but eventually she was motioned to come forward. She did, the woman yelled at her, and Lillya got upset, "Why did she call me over if she was just going to yell at me?" But as she was leaving, she noticed an apple in her pocket; something that she hadn't had before. She couldn't

even imagine what an apple tasted like because it had been so long since she had had a piece of fruit - something fresh, something juicy, something sweet. She couldn't wait to get back to her prison cell although she didn't know how she would eat it and not be noticed. She was afraid of getting caught, but could not turn down this gift, and slowly over the day and night she nibbled it. The next morning, the same guard who had yelled at her the day before happened to be assigned to keeping Lillya in line out in the prison yard. When Lillya left to go back to her cell she found half a pear in her pocket, this was the most exciting event that had occurred to her since she got to the prison - someone was being kind to her, or was it kindness?

The exercise ground had a couple of trees and Lillya had thirty minutes of fresh air a day. She was able to wash once a week and always left with a chill that lasted through the night. She was served hot water and black bread and was grateful. Lillya prayed every night but as time passed, she became uncertain for whom she prayed and whether it was for death or life.

The man in the cell next to her continued having one-way conversations with her, but she remained steadfast in not answering, believing it could only lead to trouble. He continued talking, for he had no one else to hear him, and he had much to say about what was going on in their country. He used to carve little pieces of driftwood that one of the

soldiers would bring to him and for a short period of time each day, he was even trusted with a knife to make the faces and the legs and arms out of these little pieces of wood, and he gave them to the soldier to take home for his children to play with, and they developed a friendly relationship. Lillya listened to what the man would say to the soldier, and after some time, realized that perhaps the man had a motive to his mission.

At night, the prisoners sang out different melodies with their own words to get simple messages to the others. It could be as simple as taking a hymn they sang in church, one that everyone knew, and a man or woman wailing out their names and telling the others they were still alive. Just before dawn, the guards couldn't help but get a little sleepy themselves and things that would never get by them during the day went unnoticed in the night.

A woman guard, sent to clean Lillya once a week, slowly developed a familiarity with her. She entered the cell with a bucket of clean water, soap and a stiff brush to scrub off lice and ticks. She was surprisingly patient and gentle with Lillya; sensations Lillya had not felt since her days with a lady's maid. Then one day, she brought them a small cake and split it in two and, without Lillya ever saying a word, they were bonded into a fellowship. Soon, Lillya found her voice as well. She had gone without speaking to

practically anyone since she had arrived. She discovered that she had more in common with this woman in the prison than she could have imagined. Their biggest bonding taking place over horses and riding. Her name was Julietta, and they developed an actual friendship, and to her great surprise, one afternoon Julietta met her at the prison gate, Lillya believing she would be going on her typical morning walk, but instead there was Julietta's horse, bridled and saddled. Julietta took the reins and handed them to Lillya. Many others in the prison looked on in disbelief, but for those ten minutes, Lillya flew through the yard with Julietta right behind and the smile on Lillya's face was almost bigger than the horse itself. She didn't know that she could be happy again and thought that it would have been impossible, but here was proof that it wasn't.

When Julietta had Lillya all to herself, she stopped and took Lillya aside and handed her a note that could be kept only between the two of them.

It turned out that Julietta's father had once run the popcorn and candy concession stand at Dmitri and Petra's circus. So, unbeknownst to Lillya, Julietta had known Lillya all of her life and she remembered the good deeds Lillya's family had done for hers and for her person by letting Julietta keep some of the costumes that had been made for circus acts – bright colors: red,

purple, fuchsia, gold, like the colors of some of the most beautiful flowers, dahlias, and Julietta played with these outfits and they made up much of what her family could not offer her. Dmitri and Petra sought her father's opinions, and she remembered her mother telling her how the respect they had shown her father helped him to grow and become a better man and if their Lillya was in the prison, Julietta knew it was her duty to find a way to get her out. This was the first time Lillya had heard such an idea from the lips of Julietta; the first time she had reason to believe she might have a way to find Natasha.

One night a sweet message came out of the man in the cell next to her, "She's my daughter," he sang. "She's my daughter," he sang again, "She's, my daughter." Later in the evening another verse came out, "Trust her, trust her, she's my daughter," and Lillya recognized that the man had been put into place to help her. All these months she had been cursing him.

Later that same day, Julietta came again to take Lillya for her walk out into the courtyard and she jiggled some keys that she had in her back pocket and whispered in Lillya's ear, "One night, when you least expect it, your door will be open, and it will be time for you to leave. There will be someone waiting for you, I can't tell you now who it will be, but my father

recognizes your importance and has arranged a way for you to go and not be seen."

Lillya shivered and started to cough. It was hard for her to take in what the woman was saying and believe it could be true. But then, she had nothing more important to do than to better her circumstances, which couldn't have been much worse. And even if these other underground soldiers would use her for their own ploy, it was better than spending her days and nights in the prison all alone and she would be able to see the moon and stars and maybe find Anton, or her father, or even Natasha.

Then one night she found her cell door unlocked.

Chapter 42

St. Petersburg, August 1904

As the children of Nicholas and Alexandra grew old enough to ride, Lillya became their first riding teacher. As a baroness, she was a Lady-in-Waiting to the royal family and was familiar with the palaces and imperial stables. Her first pupil was Grand Duchess Olga who turned five in 1900. Olga was a fearless and determined rider, even at her early age. The Grand Duchesses Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia each born two years apart began to ride as children under the guidance of Lillya in the Tsar's stables and horse training grounds at the Winter Palace in central St. Petersburg and the Alexander Palace in Tsarkoye Selo.

Alexei Nikolaevich the Tsarevich was born in August of 1904 and Lillya shared in the royal family's joy at the birth of the heir to the empire, she even had the honor of being allowed to hold the infant one day when the empress brought him out to greet his sisters.

Even as a toddler, Alexei was delicate but nonetheless very curious and eager to try anything new. He loved to be placed on a horse with Lillya or his mother. He was often required to appear in public on horseback and in military uniform, so his training extended to walking and parading but he was not encouraged to gallop or jump for fear of an accident.

St. Petersburg, October 1904

At 16, Vladimir was already handsome and charming. He had a swagger, a kind of presence when he walked, a composure. People seemed to focus on him just as he focused on the steps he took crossing the wire to the other side. He was magnetic. All the girls at the Imperial Theatrical School were drawn to Vladimir and they all fell hard for him.

One special girl, whom Lillya would have adored him to choose was her dear friend Katya's daughter, Donatalia, a very talented ballerina who also attended the Imperial Theatrical School, and as her mother had been, she too was at the top of her class and would one day be a prima ballerina. However, she was three years younger than Lillya's Vladimir.

Liking the girl, while at the same time feeling a sense of kinship with her, as they both had experienced terrible losses at a young age, Lillya would go out of her way so that Donatalia would feel less alone and know that she had another woman she could talk to besides her father's partner's wife, Mary Bradley of Savannah, who had been especially kind to Donatalia that first summer.

Lillya would invite Donatalia to do things mothers and daughters would enjoy doing together; after all, Lillya had borne a son, but she still

liked sharing many girlish things with someone who appreciated her sensibility and friendship.

She could tell by the way Donatalia fidgeted with her hands whenever Vladimir entered the room or spoke to her that the girl had a crush on her son. And she could tell by looking at Vladimir and the way he responded to Donatalia that it was probably true for him as well, but three years was a big difference at that age. Vladimir was getting ready to graduate and Donatalia hadn't even struck her middle stride. Donatalia was reaching up to the stars, wondering when she'd catch one, while Vladimir was already shining like one. But it didn't stop Lillya from enjoying the friendship her son and Donatalia kept, thinking that their crush was unknown to others, when to her it was perfectly clear.

Then Lillya remembered that day in the coffee shop when Donatalia's mother told Lillya about the conversation she had with her daughter in this exact same spot about the tea for the Tsar and all about Bergamot, and the dangerous path the men would travel through China just to please the Tsar and Tsarina. She had heightened her nose and its ability to remember a scent and how special was its flavor and that of the delicate cardamom seed when it fell out of its shell. Like the stories Lillya would later tell. The aroma of

her tales was always potent and undeniable. They were the kinds of stories people liked to pass on.

The Winter Palace, December 1904

Tsar Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra requested that Lillya's son Vladimir and Donatalia, create a special performance for them and present it on the lawn of the Winter Palace. It would be a private spectacle. Everyone would know about it, which would create a buzz of excitement, but few would be invited to see it. It put Vladimir in an enviable position among his peers and Donatalia, well, just the sight of her became unbearable to many. Girls had spent years waiting for a chance to be chosen to become the "prima" dancer at the school just like Donatalia had waited, too, and she shared with Lillya her dreams that one day she would represent her country, Russia, like Anna Pavlova or Agrippina Vaganova.

Glittering chandeliers hanging from the painted ceiling dimmed ever so slightly as the spotlight was turned to Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, the Tsar's uncle. When he started playing the melody to *Kalinka*, the empress' favorite song, on his famed flute everybody began to politely roar and clap their hands.

Anton contributed several courtly clowns and two fire-eaters and to make the evening even more of a family affair Grand Duke Sergei joined the circus band playing a lively melody as their tigers Midnight and Satin jumped through hoops. Despite all this, Lillya felt as nervous as she had before her own first performance at the Winter Palace many years earlier.

Then Tsar Nicholas signaled the sign of silence with his hands. Not a sound could be heard other than the sound of their breathing. The musicians played their first gentle notes and her awkwardly tall, adolescent son approached the utterly still Donatalia to take her hand.

At the first spark of Vladimir's fingers touching hers, Donatalia began to thaw her frozen form. Handsome Vladimir was there to rescue her and lead the way. Like a magician surprising a crowd by pulling a rabbit from an empty hat, she took her first step. Astonished by the perfect fluidity of her movement, Vladimir was entranced. With each step she slowly drifted into what he referred to as the otherworld, for she was gifted in ways he had never witnessed before.

When the Empress Alexandra soaked them in her smile and nodded with approval, Lillya knew at once that she had been blessed.

Donatalia and Vladimir moved like butterflies, free in their motion, like a young Roman god and goddess, telling their story.

Later that evening, Lillya and Anton introduce Donatalia's father, Pelé to the Tsar and Tsarina. He could barely keep himself from trembling with awe at meeting the man all Russians regarded as a deity, their divinely chosen king. The most venerated man in the country and now he was standing before him making small talk about his daughter's dancing ability!

Pelé had done his fair share of hobnobbing with the royals. His friend Anton had introduced him to Archduke Sergei when they came to see the horseless carriage company in which Pelé was an investor and racing enthusiast. Sergei had a great interest in the newest technologies, and it wasn't long before Pelé was telling him all about carriages and engines and when Anton dropped the fact that he was the Petrovsky of the Petrovsky & Sutton Spinnery he was fully enthralled. In no time they were talking about cotton and to Sergei's amazement, asbestos! Asbestos for fireproofing was essential for ships, especially naval vessels and this would lead to big Imperial Navy contracts. Pelé would repay Anton for the introduction with an asbestos curtain, a circus tent and a hundred colorful circus costumes of the finest silks and cottons.

When the Russian Imperial Baltic Fleet prepared to sail for the Sea of Japan, Pelé took Donatalia on a tour of the battleship *Oslyaba* before it left

port. He wanted her to see all the fine uniforms and asbestos fire fighting suits that were made with fabric from his spinnery. The ship was enormous and Donatalia loved climbing up and down the many stairways to the upper and lower decks and admired the crisp white uniforms of the hundreds of officers and seamen.

Donatalia loved her father's enthusiasm for his business and understood how much pride he took in showing her his products. When he demonstrated his spinning and weaving machines or made her feel the textures of the fabrics that came from his looms she felt as though he was dancing his own ballet but only for her.

Chapter 43

Outside the walls of Peter and Paul Prison, Petrograd, June 1922

Lillya was met by a group of people dressed in dark clothes, apparently one in uniform but not dangerous to them. She was rushed away to a small rowboat. Silently, they took her to a shack on the side of the river opposite the Winter Palace. There a few people spoke gently and politely to her. They gave her food and water which she devoured feverishly. Later they brought her some Vodka but were careful not to give her too much. She recognized some of the voices from her circus days, but she was no longer able to put names to the faces.

These people were the survivors of her family's circus! They had rescued her and intended to hide her in the midst of the new circus they had created after the revolution and civil war. The circus was popular again in Lenin's Russia.

She was kept hidden by young men and women who had seen her and Anton and even Vladimir perform when they were children. They knew they could learn much from her but for the time being they would have to keep her presence among them a secret. They would keep her near their horses and let her teach them the skills she still knew and could perform well, but not in public, at least not by her real name. She begged to perform in a mask

and the director almost let her but decided against it for her own good – even masked, her perfectly balanced slender frame would give her identity away.

For her part, Lillya was happy to work in stables to get regular meals, a bath now and then and a warm place to sleep. She didn't even trouble anyone to find out what they knew about Anton and her father. There would be time for that, and besides, she feared the worst and was not eager to hear it spoken.

The Bolsheviks loved circus. Lenin promoted the resurgence of popular independent circus troupes and many of the performers from Anton and Lillya's circus were working again and basking in the adoration of proletarian audiences just as they had the aristocracy.

Leningrad, May 1924

One day when Lillya was out shopping on the Nevsky Prospekt, she ran into Helena, Lana and Gretta gazing into a shop window. She was surprised to see them and approached them eagerly but when they recognized her, they reacted as though they were seeing a ghost and frantically ran away, perhaps they believed they had seen a ghost. Did they believe she was dead? Did they know the fate of Anton? She stood frozen

and baffled watching them run. She could only hope that she would see them someday again and learn from them.

Leningrad, 1926

Lillya worked with a small circus under a secret identity. She trained the youngest riders and occasionally even put on a secret show for her colleagues – still able to astonish them. Unfortunately, her talent gave away her identity to a few who remembered her distinctive style.

A few months after the death of Lenin, which was a sad occasion for everyone in the city, she spoke laughingly of the new leader, Joseph Stalin saying that he is a man of small stature who surrounds himself with even smaller men to make himself feel bigger than he really is.

Lillya was ratted out to the State Political Directorate for this defamatory statement by a rival circus horsewoman who was jealous of her talent and legend. One morning officers of the secret police known as the GPU appeared at the stable while she was cleaning out the stalls and took her away.

She was identified as Lillya Englehardt, the baroness who escaped from Peter and Paul prison and sentenced to 20 years of hard labor in the work camp on Solovetsky Island in the White Sea.

She was put on a crowded train to the camp with a number of St. Petersburg's most talented actors, musicians, writers, and artists. Seldom had she kept the company of such a distinguished group of citizens. Many recognized her and acknowledged her talent, and all commiserated on the truth that their talents and achievements were now of little value – indeed for many they are the very cause of their persecution.

Chapter 44

St. Petersburg, January 1905

On a wintry St. Petersburg Sunday in January, the much-loved Father Gregory Gapon lead laborers demonstrating for better working conditions to protest in front of the Winter Palace. The Tsar was not at the palace and could not go out to meet them, as they had hoped.

Lillya, Anton and Yuri were staying at their townhouse near the palace. In the afternoon, they heard hundreds of gun shots and there was panic in the streets beneath their windows. The crowd had grown unruly and Imperial Guards and Cossacks began firing at them randomly. The chaos in the capital was rising to greater and greater heights but the Tsar still refused to make any concessions to the desperate people.

This event was a catalyst for the formation of organized resistance to the government. Factory workers, professionals and peasants began forming councils called Soviets that allowed them to collectively air their grievances and elect delegates to higher levels of the pyramid.

At Petrovsky & Sutton a group of the most vocal and belligerent workers had formed a soviet lead by a certain Konstantin Orlovsky, a lean, bitter uneducated man whom Pelé regarded with disdain because after reading a few pages of Karl Marx he thought he knew how his business

ought to be run. He reported to the newly formed St. Petersburg soviet. Pelé spoke to the assembled workers about the advantages of working together and making sacrifices for the company so it could grow and expand but they demanded higher pay for shorter hours and all manner of governance and management concessions. They wanted to run the company now and they were more than willing to strike to get control of it.

Nikolsky Gate, Moscow, February 17, 1905

A nitroglycerin bomb wrapped in a newspaper was tossed into the carriage of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich blowing him to bits, the same Sergei who only a few months earlier had played the flute for Lillya and her family at the Winter Palace. He was the uncle of the Tsar, a beloved family friend, frequent guest at the estate and a confidante of both Yuri and his father.

Lillya, Anton and Vladimir attended the funeral of Sergei at the Chudov Monastery inside the Kremlin in Moscow. As they entered the chapel this moment gripped her with sadness and dread just as the funeral of Alexander II had affected her as a girl of eleven. She gave her childhood friend Nicki a hug and saw the fear and uncertainty in his eyes. Sergei had been a special adviser and confidante of the young Tsar even though he had

been blamed for the disaster at the Khodynka Field on the day of his coronation.

The Archduke's body had been so mutilated by the blast that his coffin remained closed, and his beloved Preobrazhensky Life-Guards Regiment uniform was draped over the remains, as he had wished to be buried in this uniform.

Pelé and Donatalia took the train to Moscow to pay their respects to the Archduke and the royal family. They could not be permitted into the family events that Anton, Lillya and Vladimir attended but as the Royal family exited the monastery Nicholas II spotted them in the crowd and nodded sweetly to them, Donatalia gasped and turned to Pelé asking him if he had seen what she had and he agreed tearfully that he had.

Since the reviled Bloody Sunday in January the royal family no longer came to the Winter Palace and retreated to the Alexander Palace at Tsarkoye Selo. Lillya would take the train out to the Tsar's village and continue giving riding lessons to the royal children under the watchful eye of the Imperial Guards.

St. Petersburg, May 1905

Russia was at war with Japan over control of ports on the Pacific. Nicholas II sent the pride of the Russian Navy, the Baltic fleet, from St. Petersburg around Africa and through the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. Like a drunken gambler, the Tsar went all in and lost everything on a single roll of the dice when the Japanese sank seven Russian battleships in the Battle of Tsushima killing 5,000 Russian sailors. Among the ships that went down was the *Oslyaba*, the very one Donatalia had visited with her father just a few months earlier. When news came out about the disaster, all she could think of was the crew of young sailors they had met a few months earlier that were now lost at sea.

The Russian public reaction was stunned into a feeling of emptiness. The Tsar and the government barely acknowledged the defeat. That morning, Russia was the world's third greatest sea power but by nightfall its formidable navy was gone. There would be no triumphant return of the fleet or victory celebrations and little if any public mourning. Yuri and Lillya read about it first in the French and German press.

A few months later Russia and Japan would sign a peace treaty in Portsmouth, New Hampshire brokered by US President, Theodore Roosevelt. Russia was humiliated, while Japan was fatally emboldened.

Chapter 45

Solovetsky Island, 1926

After arriving at the labor camp Lillya is first put to work in the kitchen but seeing her interest in the horses, she is reassigned to caring for the animals and working in the camp gardens. The worst things about the camp are the constant humiliation, penetrating winter wind and hunger. The best things are the camaraderie of her fellow inmates and the opportunity to be out in the open air. The camp has about 35 Don River horses, the horses of the Cossacks and the favorite war horse of the Russian Army. They were extremely strong animals and could go for weeks with very little food and water. Thousands of them and their Cossack riders had been brutally slaughtered in the last war due in no small part to the use of machine guns, mines, barbed wire and rapid-fire artillery. These new weapons made the horse worse than useless in war. They were now only big unshielded targets after thousands of years of being the most fearsome things on any battlefield.

A captain from the cavalry stopped in to see her one day. She could not imagine why. But it turned out he had heard the rumors about his prisoner, Lillya, and how she could make magic on a horse's back. He wasn't very friendly or kind, as a matter of fact, he stuck a pistol to her head and demanded she follow him out to the barn where all the horses were kept.

He told her to pick a horse; that they were both going to ride. Lillya became extremely fearful and asked him where they would be going. He didn't answer her but kept on walking forward. Lillya sensed that she was in trouble and that she had only one choice and that was to do as he said if she wanted to live. He shot a bird overhead that was flying by, just to let her know he meant business and he had one of the boys in the barn saddle up the horse and when he was through, he handed her the reins. "Come," he said, and she did. They entered a quiet part of the barn, more isolated than any place she had seen thus far, and he said one word, "Teach." Lillya was rather confused. A captain in the Red Army asking her to teach him an elitist form of horse art, but that was exactly what he was doing. His name was Paul Blatsky. He was married to a French woman named Brissetta. He kept it very impersonal. He was actually cold and rather mean to her, but she knew he was drawn to her knowledge and as long as she could show him something valuable to him, she would survive.

Captain Blatsky came when he could. He didn't have any set schedule, and he never told her exactly what he wanted and exactly what he would give to have it. It was silent but understood. Lillya knew she could not mention this to anyone, which made it more difficult for her among the prisoners. She was too old for them to assume he wanted a physical

relationship, but they all wondered what did she know that would make the captain desire to spend hours with her? For Lillya, it was the only time she felt free. The wind when she rode felt like soap and water being sprayed upon her body, and even though she would ride until she was in a wet sweat, she felt clean and sometimes even hopeful. She didn't really want to imagine, what the other aristocratic men and women were being forced to do, for it was too awful. If she could ride, cleaning toilets would be a joy.

She wasn't afraid of hard work, unlike the other aristocratic ladies. She was stronger and less frightened than most of the other women she knew. Her years with the circus had made her bolder, and more open, less afraid of approaching the unknown. Determined and strong-willed, she wasn't going to let her age and the wear and tear on her body stop her from dreaming and finding a way to change her situation. Lillya was resilient and she had no intention of giving up. Being where she was did nothing but inspire her. She was going to find Anton, go to Natasha's cave outside Perm, and see her grown-up grandchildren and her loving son. Whatever it took, she was going to make this happen. She was a force to be reckoned with when she got something fixed in her mind and she had made an internal decision to follow her dream and find the way home to her family.

She prayed Anton would be there, too. She had no intention of having her epitaph say, “Lillya died in a cold, wet prison.” She was going to live, and she was no longer bound by the rules that would make her submit.

Forced Labor Camp, Ust-Kut, Irkutsk Oblast, Siberia, July 1931

After Captain Blatsky was promoted, Lillya was herself promoted to wrangler-at-large for all varieties of horses on the lands of the Soviet empire. She was sent to a series of camps in Siberia including Ust-Kut in Irkutsk Oblast along the Lena River in the watershed of the Lena-Angara Plateau north of Lake Baikal. This was a land of endless valleys and rugged mountains, riven by two great rivers, the Lena and the Angara, that flowed north into the Arctic Ocean. The rivers froze over in winter and flooded with fresh melt in the spring. This camp’s notable alumni included Lev Bronstein, later to be known as Leon Trotsky. His comrade, Ioseb Jughashvili aka Joseph Stalin served time in Novaya Uda in Ust-Undinsky District a mere 300 miles distant.

In her journey across the vast eastern plains, Lillya met for the first time several breeds of Russian wild horses including the Przewalski’s horses also known at takhis. In one encounter with takhis she dismounted and walked toward a small herd of the short, big bellied, four-toned creatures.

Amused by their white noses, brown heads and light-brown torsos ending with black legs, she walked among them grazing near a stream. She stood still for an hour until one slowly came near and circled her to determine her intentions. Their bellies and heads reminded her of the zebras in the circus menagerie, but she had not spent any time riding them – why bother with them when she had so many beautiful horses to ride.

The filly grew bored and walked back to the group, but a young colt came near and nudged her with its nose. She grabbed onto his mane and stroked his neck. Drawing him closer, she pulled herself onto his back and whispered in his ear. He shuddered with the sudden awareness of having a rider atop him for the first time. The camp guards watched her in disbelief as they have never seen anyone ride one of these horses. The horse carried Lillya to his herd, and she ran with them for a few hours. She wanted to stand up on his back as she once did in the circus but feared that her age and the lack of a good bone doctor in Siberia made the cost of falling too great to risk.

Another time she saw Yakutian horses being driven by a group of Yakut herdsmen. These short-legged horses have highly attuned noses and ears to sense the approach of any predator. They evolved from domesticated horses brought to the region by the Yakut indigenous people in the 13th

Century. They were docile and had hair as long and thick as a sheep's wool. In Winter, they could smell plants growing beneath the snow and dig down with their sharp hooves until they got to them. They hibernated for months standing upright, covered in snow looking like a field of moguls that awakened and shook off its icy coat in the Spring.

The Yakut kept dozens of them and used them as a source of milk and meat which was quite fatty and considered a delicacy. Despite being short and rotund they were a wonderful riding horse in the rugged terrain of the plateau. Lillya even got on the back of one and rode it standing up. When the animal got tired, it stopped and would not move. They Yakut children laughed historically as Lillya stomped on the shaggy creatures back to no avail. She stopped short of training them for dressage, though she thought they would look rather cute prancing and side-stepping in a horse ballet.

Everyone in the camp was released when the Germans invaded Russia in the Summer of 1941 – not out of kindness but because the government no longer wanted to be responsible for feeding them.

At that time, though 71 years-old, emaciated and addle-brained, Lillya wanted to again begin her journey to Perm to find Natasha. Fifteen years in the Eastern wilderness passed like single night's dream. She had spent her fifties and sixties tending to horses instead of the grandchildren she knew

existed but had never seen. Her dotage had been stolen from her, but it was gone now and there was no value in bitterness and regret. She was at least grateful that she was allowed to spend in the company of animals and beneath the limitless Siberian sky – much better than the starvation and bloodshed that took place in the West beneath the fist of Stalin. She walked out of the camp with a horse and a sack of potatoes and after a few weeks came upon a small station on a spur of the Trans-Siberian Railroad and boarded a train back West.

Chapter 46

St. Petersburg, October 1905

Strikes paralyzed the city and only the St. Petersburg Soviet could persuade the railway and factory workers to go back to work when their demands were met. After first resisting, Nicholas capitulated and accepted their plan for a democratically elected representative government. The following spring, Yuri was elected to the Duma, Russia's first experiment with a European-style parliament.

Pelé Petrovsky had felt wary of the risk of living in Russia as early as May and told Donatalia to be prepared to be sent to America in the fall unless things improved. Of course, they had gotten much worse.

Donatalia objected quite vigorously. She pleaded with her father not to be sent away, not to be forced to drop out of the Imperial Theatrical School, not now just when she was just hitting her stride. She threw daily fits over his demand that she leave her friends, her budding career and her beloved St. Petersburg because of a few strikes and riots. Yes, the Archduke had been assassinated but who would bother to harm her, just a young ballerina who only wanted to make people admire her dancing. Nonetheless, her father persisted and booked passage to New York for her on the enormous new ocean liner named *Amerika* that sailed from Hamburg. It was

decided that he would accompany her to Hamburg and return to St. Petersburg after seeing her off. Always the optimist, he told her he expected to come to visit her in New York the following Spring and that they would travel to Paris together. There would be many exciting opportunities for her in New York, some of the best dancers and teachers in Russia were emigrating to the United States and she was sure to find a thriving expatriate community there. He'd even made arrangements for her to stay with an older Russian woman named Catherine who was the sister of an old family friend, but nothing would appease Donatalia.

“We’ll find a place in the neighborhood and make a happy life for ourselves,” he said on the boat to Hamburg. “There are plenty of business opportunities in New York.” He arranged for her to study with Olga Preobrajenska who trained under Marius Petipa before he was forced out, for political reasons as rumor had it. “I’m afraid the way things are going it’s too risky for you to return to Russia until things settle down.”

The hardest thing was saying goodbye to her teachers and classmates at the ballet school, especially Vladimir who she was madly in love with though she could not bring herself to say that to him, especially now knowing that she would probably never see him again.

Pelé bought her several new outfits for the trip and Donatalia went through her mother's things to find a few pieces of jewelry to remember her by. She chose a gold bracelet, diamond earrings, a pearl necklace and an emerald brooch that had been a gift from Lillya. She thought she could wear it with a particularly nice new green dress.

St. Petersburg, November 1905

A few days after returning from Hamburg, Pelé received a telegram from the steamship line informing him politely that Donatalia had fallen down a stairway on board the ship and suffered a broken leg. He was crushed. All his efforts to protect his daughter had resulted in an injury that would surely bring an end to all her dreams of becoming a ballerina. She was right all along; he should have kept her here with him in St. Petersburg. What would her mother Katya have thought of him now? He wept for days and shared this terrible news with Lillya who sympathized and encouraged him to send Donatalia a telegram via Catherine. He was barely able to get out a few words:

The world is big, there is much to explore. Remember, you come from good blood. Stay strong!

Your loving father.

What a pathetic note, he thought, but it was all he could muster. He only wished he could be there with his daughter who must feel abandoned and broken in a strange country.

Chapter 47

Road to Perm, July 1941

The light reflecting off her pupils and the deep emerald green that surrounded them, unlike the rest of her exterior sparkled like that of a young girl after her first kiss and revealed that the rumors that had once been spread about her, were probably all true.

The fire with the cast iron caldron on top, spit out flames. They would need them to stay warm and cook the soup she was making from weeds she collected that morning and a bone she had stolen from a dog. Tonight, Lillya would sleep once again in an abandoned cabin with two women she had met along the way. If only she hadn't been such a familiar face, she thought, then she could have traveled by train or boat, but unfortunately, now it was too risky her scattered old brain still told her. It was safer to travel by horse and with some companions. Besides she wouldn't be staying long, none of them would, she told herself.

After gathering more wood for the night and eating what could barely be dubbed as supper, Lillya prepared for a long uncomfortable night. The sofa that would double as her bed, had springs popping through the worn fabric that were just annoying enough to wake her up no matter what side she was laying on. Still, as she had found out the night before, it was better

than sleeping with the mice that were scurrying across the planks on the floor below.

Things hadn't turned out as she had imagined, but she spent little time feeling sorry for herself. She had witnessed horrors and here she was still alive holding onto a dream that fueled her body when it had nothing else. However, she did take comfort in knowing her husband Anton, was not here to see her in this predicament.

Many days and nights she would keep a low profile and keep on going. She needed to find Natasha. Natasha would know what to do, but she kept that thought to herself.

Lillya placed more logs on the fire before curling up on the sofa. There was a distinct chill in the cabin and the women each took turns through the night attending the fire so they wouldn't freeze. Lillya tossed and turned, then she heard an owl outside the window. *It must be an Eagle Owl just like the one that lived in the tree outside my bedroom when I was a girl.*

This led her to think of her father for he would imitate the owl when he came to say his good nights to her, and his distinctive ooh-hu always made her laugh. *Some owls live to be 50 years old. I wonder if the old owl is still alive. He might be the only one that remains.* She smiled because the

night they left on what her father had named, “her adventure” he came out early, flapped both his wings and hooted a loud fare-thee-well.

Lillya’s memories kept her going; that and the secret she shared with Natasha. Perm, the town where Natasha spent the first three years of her life, was on the western side of the Ural Mountain range but it was no longer shown on any map.

Lillya was determined to find Natasha and she wouldn’t stop until she knew that both she and their secret were safe. Then come spring she would plant the sort of vegetables that grow near the mountains and come the warmth of summer she would shed her heartache and in the dirt she would bury all but her own best memories, even the ones of Anton that stopped her from moving forward.

On this night, like many, she dreamed of memories of her friend. Lillya loved the night, for she was not limited by the physicality and realities of the day. At night she could go wherever she wanted to go, and her subconscious was in charge. To her knowledge, her conscious self had very little to say about it and each night came with a surprise.

The cold air in the cabin hit her nostrils like smelling salts and she began to awaken. Lillya looked out the window, but it was still dark. Then she heard the rattling snore of one of her roommates that sounded like a

volcano erupting and realized it wasn't just the cold that had woken her up.

It was nearer to sunrise, but she still had some time before anyone would expect anything from her.

Lillya lay quietly on the sofa and shut her eyes once again. The erupting sounds of the women snoring represented inactivity in the cabin and was actually welcome once she had admitted to herself that sleep was over for the night, but it did not mean she couldn't remain where she was and let herself daydream and return to her childhood.

The path to Perm was a clear path. The directions she followed were simply the description Natasha told her as a teenager, and much must have changed since then. Lillya wondered if the shack where she was headed even still existed and what made her think that all these years later Natasha would be waiting. Still, as children Natasha made her memorize the directions to her house, the one her great uncle on her mother's side promised to leave her.

"Perm is on the western side of the Ural Mountain range on the Kama River. I'm told it's the prettiest river in our country. Our winters are very cold so be certain to pack your warmest clothes but in the summer be ready for the heat for it gets very hot. Now repeat after me, when you enter the

town look for the new opera house. Everyone knows it. From there you will head toward the mountain range and tell people you are looking for the home of Peter Palitov, the miner. Each person you ask will get you a little closer to his shack, which is located a short distance from his cave. My uncle is a miner. This will be our meeting place should you ever need one. No one would ever suspect it or come to look for you there.”

“Natasha you’re being silly.” Lillya said.

“You never know what life will bring you, if you are ever in danger, you must go there. I will be waiting for you. There is that unspeakable bond between us, I will know.”

Sometimes Lillya had to pull herself from the past. One of the women who had spent the night with her last night decided that she was going in the same direction as Lillya. Lillya was not too pleased, but she didn’t own the forest, or the roads and she couldn’t stop the woman from following her. The woman, whose name was Katrina would have her uses. She was a good shot, unlike Lillya.

Katrina couldn’t tell Lillya exactly where she was going and why, but the same could be said for Lillya. So, in silence they both headed toward the

Ural Mountain range, Lillya in front with Katrina not far behind her, and for now that was good enough.

Lillya didn't have the slightest interest in befriending Katrina, the less she knew, the better. Lillya didn't trust her but then again, she had come to trust no one, so Katrina was in the company of everyone in Russia except Natasha.

Lillya tried to leave Katrina behind several times that first day. But Katrina was nothing, if not cunning, and after a while Katrina began to chip away at some of the stones that made up Lillya's wall, besides, as much as she didn't want to admit it, Lillya was lonely. She had always had her father, Natasha, Anton or Vladimir.

"It's easier traveling with Katrina," she began to tell herself, but still she couldn't quite reconcile the uneasy feeling she had in the pit of her stomach. Everyone she ever loved was dead or had vanished. She thought about Natasha and wondered if she was now the wealthy one between them.

Natasha's status of maid would serve her better than pampered dilettante who mingled with the nobles, whose great aunt was a Duchess and whose uncle had married a widowed baroness. No, in this new Russia Lillya's past was something better kept to herself. She pretended to be Natasha only with a different name, and tried to remember all that she

learned about the lower classes who now ruled post-revolutionary Russia.

However, Natasha was tutored like herself by the most notable tutors of St. Petersburg, her father had insisted.

“Xenia,” Katrina laughed when she was alone. “Oh, how I, and most every girl I knew wanted to be her when she was young. She has no memory of me. I was just a dirty child helping my father shoe her father’s horses in their barn.” But Katrina remembered how Lillya would sparkle when she entered the stables.

She had heard rumors of Lillya’s affair and oh how she wished they were friends, and she could hear the story from the lips of Lillya, but for now she would just have to find happiness in knowing that the legend of that story was sleeping beside her at night.

Lillya who had a proper education, in her present predicament listened attentively to Katrina’s speech trying silently to imitate each and every nuance, the way she strung her phrases, what subjects or verbs she omitted. In her present disguise, she purposely spoke incorrect Russian and filled her speech with the words that only peasants used. Just like them, Lillya couldn’t help who she was born to, and she did her best to appear as someone other than who she really was. It had become another challenge for the notorious Lillya. *Learn to speak as horribly as you can*, she told herself.

Katrina was not very forthcoming herself. She spoke in half-truths, but Lillya found it hard to fault her as her stories seemed to be more truthful than her own. Katrina said that her father worked in St. Petersburg, and she had been the daughter of a blacksmith, working class. “Business is business,” Katrina said her father used to say. “As long as they pay, that customer is good enough for me.”

Then one day a Red sympathizer showed up at the shop at the same time as a White sympathizer and they got into an argument. Young boys and not very good shots, when they both drew their guns, she was later told, they both missed. Tragically, a bullet hit the cast iron pot over her father’s head, ricocheted off the pot and went directly through her father’s heart killing him on the spot. Both boys blamed it on the other and got into a fist fight before realizing the trouble they could be in and when they heard the policeman whistle, they both went running in opposite directions. “No one wanted to take responsibility for the death of the beloved blacksmith,” Katrina said. “He was known to be on the side of the paying customer and tried to serve both sides professionally with regard. He was well liked by all.” Katrina finished, wanting to add the phrase, “even by your father,” but of course she did not.

Lillya assumed an identity that closely resembled Natasha's story. It was the one that she knew best. She was familiar with maids for they had served her all of her life. She took her middle name and used it as her first and borrowed the surname of her favorite butler, Borkovich. Yes, Xenia Borkovich was much better than Lillya Engelhardt for there was only one Engelhardt in St. Petersburg, and he certainly didn't work the fields or clean out the barn or manage the horses. Lillya's new identity came from months of planning with her husband and father. The evening she left her childhood estate, her heart kept on beating, but everything else seemed to have gotten lost except for her memories.

Chapter 48

Yuri's townhouse, December 1909

Lillya sat by herself looking at pictures of her son in the family photo album. Vladimir, Lillya and Anton's only child, was born on a cold, rainy night in 1888. The wind howled, almost as if it was singing a tune addressing the gods and goddesses, praying that everything would be all right.

Lillya not only suffered the pain of childbearing, but she suffered the anguish of believing this might well be their only child. She had heard childbirth could be quite painful, but she had had a very high threshold of pain. In the process of the birth, as much as she loved the thought of being a mother and couldn't wait to do the job, she had decided that one heir was all they needed.

But she did not let the pain get in the way of building a strong relationship with her son, for she believed him to be a remarkable young man with unusual talents and was the kind of boy who could touch the insides of anyone who met him and make a prize out of anything small or big. Lillya adored Vladimir and loved to watch him walk the wire which he learned as a child from his father as it was the duty of every Vronsky man, especially the heir, to follow in the tradition of the circus.

Vladimir was always jumping on logs, walking across nature-made bridges that seemed to be bothersome to others, but were exactly what he loved. He once saved a child from drowning and another from fear when the boy's house had caught on fire and Vladimir went where none of the other boys would venture. To save the boy, he climbed up an old tall tree that had one large branch that extended to the window where the boy was trapped and screaming, and he walked across the branch and told the boy to calm down; that everything would be safe, and he would be at home soon. It was in Vladimir's blood to want to save people, and this time he did. A lesson he remembered well later in life.

But Lillya in the empty nights and somber moods behind and in front of her often thought of the numerous nights she and Vladimir would sit by the gigantic fire in their living room and play games of cards she had taught him. Even in the cold she could feel the warmth of her son's love for her.

As a boy, Lillya's son liked to sing and dance and make up stories and every once in a while, he convinced his friend Donatalia to make one up as well. But his other favorite pastime came from the boy himself who loved to tell stories and embellish the truths of what had happened for he knew he could capture people's imaginations with his words and the color of his language. When he was nine, Lillya saved a letter he had written her, for he

had just learned to write and yet already she had something to put in the collection that would over the years bring her great delight.

Dear Mama, he wrote, *soon I'll be ten...* and he tried to spell out the Imperial Theatrical School. Even as a young boy, Lillya had to help him with his spelling though she knew that would be hard for any nine-year-old. She found it rather funny that he could come up with these big ideas and discover a way to make them come true, but he couldn't spell the words of what he was doing. He was a bright boy, she was certain of this, and one that was empathetic to others and that made her happy. She liked boys that had more girlish intuitions and she couldn't wait to see what would come out of him next.

But now it was time to pack all these things away and help her 19-year-old boy get ready to take their family circus out of Russia and settle in a new country where they would be safe and could continue the family tradition.

Anton and Lillya proposed that Vladimir take a relatively small touring company to perform in cities throughout Europe. This would allow them to leave the country relatively inconspicuously and earn money as they went. Vladimir wanted to bring his high-wire team, trapeze artists, acrobats, clowns, horses and riders along with the necessary lions, tigers and

elephants. What was a circus without these essential elements? This would amount to a cast of 40 performers, and they would need another 30 roustabouts, riggers and advance men. Adding in the menagerie and the equipment, it would require eight entire railroad cars. This would be expensive to prepare and launch, but it would give them a traveling home that could take them from St. Petersburg to Warsaw, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, Geneva, Vienna and Rome. They would paint the cars with colorful depictions of the performers and their animals to create a rolling advertisement for the show that would draw audiences to it as it rolled across the countryside.

St. Petersburg, March 1910

Lillya, Anton and a legion of Vronsky Circus family members and fans gathered at the train station to give one last cheer to the traveling company that Vladimir was taking to perform across Europe. He took with him the Kaminsky acrobats, the Volga clowns, flights of trapeze artists, a dozen equestrians and of course there was Vladimir himself, the most dazzling wire-walker in Russia, not to mention, six elephants and the tigers Midnight and Satin.

They chose a route through many cities and towns and spent the winter in the South of France. Unfortunately, that is also where Vladimir's cousin Victor ran off with a long-haired gypsy woman. Victor was a young horseman who had had his heart broken.

They began to plan a passage by ship to America where they could flourish and be safe. They would leave from Genoa, Italy and go to New York. Then head south to a warm winter in a place like Georgia or even Florida.

On the way to Genoa, they performed in Florence and on their day off Vladimir went to see another circus and was enthralled and captivated by a beautiful and magical horsewoman named Bella Cabrinzi. She rode into the arena standing astride a pair of magnificent black Friesians. The horses wore silver armor, and she was adorned with orange and blue silks. His heart melted away when she performed fabulous riding stunts and amazing feats of mounted archery.

Bella was the daughter of Sergio Cabrinzi, circus owner and one of the greatest breeders in Italy. After the performance, Vladimir had Illya, his second in command, request an audience with Bella to introduce himself. Illya was not sure it was his job to be the advance man to Vladimir's love

interest but knocked on the necessary doors and eventually persuaded people to let them through with an adequate gift of Russian Vodka and caviar.

For his part, Vladimir was a bit tongue tied and could barely speak a word of Italian – only the coos and baby talk of his Italian grandmother, Petra, but that, too would have its use. She knew not a word of Russian but could meet him at French and they ended up discussing horses and circuses for hours. Later he even sang under her window, but he captured her heart when he met with her father to purchase Senofonte the magnificent prize Belgian. Sergio drove a hard bargain and Vladimir agreed to his price before announcing his intention to marry Bella and present the horse to her as a gift.

Cabrinzi would sell the horse but was less willing to give away his eldest daughter even if the horse stayed in the family. Unshaken, Vladimir suggested a private performance of the Vronsky Circus for the Cabrinzi family and their own circus. Illya was beside himself when Vladimir gave him the instructions. How could he get the entire circus together to a performance in just three days! And weren't they planning on leaving soon for America, what about that?

“Don’t worry, Illya, just tell them that they are invited to my engagement party and might be invited to perform, if they stay sober enough.”

In a few days, during which Vladimir rode every day and took every meal with Bella, Illya and Bella's sister Veronica made arrangements for the performance/party. The evening began with a parade of horses then some fancy riding, acrobats, clowns, appearances by the elephants and tigers and finally, Vladimir doing something dazzling on the wire, disappearing in a puff of smoke and reappearing on horseback leading Senofonte in without a rider. He then dismounted, got down on his knee and asked Bella to marry him and then he motioned for her to come down from her family's box to take her seat in the empty saddle on Senofonte.

The arena fell silent as Bella weighed the question.

Bella turned first to her mother and then to her father. Seeing no objection, she stood, smiled at Vladimir and offered him her hand. The audience and the performers burst out in cheers and raucous applause. They ate, drank and celebrated until dawn. The next day Vladimir and Bella were properly married in a small Roman Catholic chapel near the Cabrinzi Circus with Illya as his best man and Veronica as Bella's maid of honor.

As Vladimir began preparing for their departure for America Illya knocked on the frame of his open door. Vladimir turned and smiled at his old friend only to see an anxious look upon his face. Illya announced that he would not be joining them on the trip to America. Vladimir was perplexed

until Illya mustered the nerve to tell him that he had asked Veronica to marry him, and she had accepted. Vladimir shouted with joy for his friend and embraced him. Veronica wanted to remain in Italy and Illya, still entranced by the beauty and elegance of the country, happily agreed. Perhaps they would join them in America someday, but for now, his heart was bound to Genoa.

St. Petersburg, May 1911

The country was becoming unsteady and yet Lillya couldn't bear the thought that her own people could destroy themselves simply out of greed. She cried at the anguish it would bring about but at night when she rode her stallion with the wind blowing through her long wavy hair, and she could hoot and holler as if she were a farmhand, the release of her true feelings put a smile on her face for she was a determined girl who would honor the love she and Anton gave to one another for, in her mind, he was a king. He was fearless and Lillya respected and adored him not just because she and Anton had made a beautiful child, but because he had the manners and the fortitude to do something amazing, at least that's what Lillya thought. She felt good about having handed Vladimir the circus and looked forward to his letters that didn't come often now that he was a family man

and a businessman as well. But every couple of months she would find an envelope that came from a stranger who had gotten it from another stranger and somehow it had made it into her circus home and her own hands. She loved getting letters like this, telling her about his wife and the family of circus performers he had taken with him to America. The last letter she got from him brought her happy news for he talked about his old childhood friend and the daughter of her friend Katya, Donatalia Petrovskaya.

Savannah, Georgia, USA, April 21, 1911.

Dear Mother,

I am so happy to tell you that by a stroke of sheer good fortune, I have been reunited with Donatalia Petrovskaya, the daughter of your dear friends Pelé and Katya Petrovsky. The very same girl I danced with at the Winter Palace before all this madness began. Donatalia had a terrible fall on board the ship when she was traveling to America and broke her leg. She can walk but, very sadly, her days as a ballet dancer have ended. Fortunately for the circus, she has awakened her mental powers and has transformed herself into a fortune-teller. She now occupies a tent devoted to reading the fortunes of our patrons. She is a marvelous addition to our company and brings great joy to all of us.

Chapter 49

Perm, August 1941

Lillya walked past the new opera house and came upon a grocery stand along the highway occupied by an exceptionally large older man who looked like he might have moved pianos for a living. Lillya examined the variety of potatoes and carrots he had on display.

“Can I help you,” he offered.

“If you can sell me a few good potatoes.”

Then she paused, wondering if she should follow Natasha’s advice and begin asking strangers for directions.

“Do you know the people of this area?”

“A few of them. Who in particular?”

“I seek the home of Peter Palitov, the miner.”

“Oh yes, Palitov. You are not far. Stay on this path but bear to the right and when your path begins to rise steeply into the mountains you will see a small wooden shack near a cave. He might not be around during the daytime, don’t expect him to come out of his mine until after sunset.”

Lillya was delighted, this was just as Natasha had described. She paid him a few rubles she’d earned teaching tricks to some young riders along the way and noticed that he had a tattoo of a circus wire walker on his arm.

“You’re fond of the circus, I see.”

“Ah yes, my circus days, but those are long past and rather sad.”

“Sad? How could time spent with the circus be sad?”

“It was in America. I worked with a circus that endured much pain and hardship. They were Russians but came to America to start over, as had I, but tragedy struck them on two occasions, once with a daughter falling to her death from the high wire and again with the father falling into a canyon as he rescued his grandson. Then the circus folded up its tent and closed forever, and I could not bear to continue living in America any longer. Russia, for all its troubles was still my home and I had to return here to the village of my parents.”

At this, Lillya was dumbstruck. This stranger seemed to be describing her son’s own circus, but she did not know these tragic facts about them.

“That’s very sad. I myself have been with a circus and may know the people you describe, but it has been many years since I’ve been in contact with them. Will you tell me their name?”

“Of course, it was called the *Circus of the Queens*, but previously it was known as the Vronsky Family Circus. Did you know them?”

Tears began to well up in her eyes. She was gasping for air and struggling to get out simply the words, “Yes, yes, … they are my family, my children, my grandchildren.” She sat down on the path and cried.

The potato vendor came around from behind his stall and bent down to help her.

“Dear lady, I am so sorry to have brought you this grief. I loved your son and his family and his circus. I will tell you all I can about them. They used to live on a farm owned by the fortune-teller, Donatella but I have not heard from them in several years.”

The vendor introduced himself as Boris and invited Lillya into his cabin to eat and drink while he told her more of his memories. Over the next hours, Lillya learned the story of the *Circus of the Queens* and her marvelous granddaughters from this old Russian roustabout.

After many hours of food, vodka, laughter and tears Boris became bold enough to ask her why she sought out Peter Palitov. Lillya confessed that she didn’t know him or seek him personally, but that she was told to come to Perm and ask for him if she was to find her old friend, Natasha. Then Boris backed away from the table and burst out laughing. Natasha was the greatest secret of Perm; a town so secret it was not on any map.

“Natasha Palitov is rumored to be the radical writer and revolutionary known as The Falcon, famous for writing essays about the plight of the illegitimate children and a leading figure in the administration of Comrade Lenin. She was a decorated hero in the revolution, a confidante of Lenin’s wife and an associate of Alexandra Kollontai who was the leader of the women’s department of the Central Committee. Now, she like everyone else in Perm was hiding. Sometimes, she was called upon by the government for special favors but mostly she holed up in a cave in the mountains. No one in Perm is supposed to know where she is, and usually we do not, but if you go to Palitov’s shack and wait for him and then are able to prove your identity and good intentions then he may lead you to her. But be wary, if he suspects you are going to harm her, he will not hesitate to shoot you on the spot. He has done that more than once. I will send word to Palitov that you seek her and that I swear you to be a decent person. Besides, you are an old woman, what risk could you pose.” Then he hesitated for a moment. “You don’t intend to kill her, do you?”

Perm, August 1941

Lillya walked for several miles until she got to a shack in the foothills that fit Boris’s description. She pounded on the door and walked all around

looking for this Peter Palitov, but no one came out, so she found a nearby stump and sat. She sat until sunset which was after ten o'clock at this time of year and she was about to pack up and return to Boris's cabin when the front door of the shack opened and out stepped Palitov, a pale, skinny miner in his seventies carrying a military rifle from the Great War. Lillya fell off her stump and he watched her carefully as she got to her feet and proclaimed her identity and intentions. Palitov was skeptical. She had no papers but claimed to be a baroness as if that would help her case and yet she possessed no proof of anything or even direct knowledge of Natasha's past that he could verify.

Lillya sat back down on the stump and began crying. She had come so far and now she would be deprived of her reunion because she lacked even a prisoner's identity card. Palitov was about to see her off when he mumbled something about identifying marks and suddenly her face began to brighten.

"A mark? Yes, I have a mark," she said. "It's this heart shaped mole on my back. Natasha would know it because she bathed me as a child. Come, take a look at this and tell her you saw it. This will convince her!"

Palitov examined the mark on her back and retreated into his shack. After an hour that seemed like an eternity to Lillya, Palitov came back out

and beckoned her to come inside. Natasha had given him permission to bring Lillya to her.

Peter then led her to the back of his cabin and pulled a rug from the floor and lifted up a door in the floor that revealed a staircase into a vast underground labyrinth of tunnels and caverns, some natural, some man-made, containing factories, living quarters and massive amounts of machinery, material and food.

They could put an army down here; she said to herself before she realized they probably had.

Natasha stood by an open-door in the side of the tunnel wall observing Lillya being walked down the path toward her. She immediately recognized her by her long strides, she walked like a rider and had the strong, bowed legs to prove it. “There you are. I wondered if I would ever see you again.”

Lillya looked up from the path, smiled and took a deep breath. “I’ve been looking for you for a very long time.”

“I know that I can be hard to find. I’m often hiding from others.”

Lillya laughed as she approached her old friend. Natasha stood, looked at her, began to cry, as did Lillya and they embraced. She wrapped Lillya in a blanket and helped her to a chair.

“But you are cold and hungry. Come let me draw you a bath and give you some American biscuits. Good people these Americans. I can now see why you sent your son there. My two sons died in our wars – one for the Tsar and another for the Revolution. Thankfully, my daughter survived, and her three boys are healthy but now they are of military age, and I fear that they too will die for Russia.”

Natasha fed Lillya then gave her a bath and put her in her own bed. Lillya lay in the bed barely awake but smiling blissfully as Natasha spoke to her.

“Alas, I think the worst is still to come. You Lillya, however, are a very old woman and you have suffered enough. I will find a way to send you to America to see your grandchildren before you die. Will you trust me to do that?”

Lillya weeps and nods submersing herself in the protective embrace of Natasha that she has longed for since childhood.

Hours later she began speaking to Lillya. “I am so sorry that I have to tell you this and so happy at the same time. Natasha, you are my cousin!”

Then she broke out crying and shaking and Natasha embraced her and comforted her.

“I know” she said. “I know.”

“You did? How?” She stares blankly at Natasha then the light goes on in her mind. “Your mother. Of course. I didn’t find out until after the revolution and then I couldn’t find you. And I’m so sorry. You are my cousin, a member of my family. You are not my maid or servant; you are my equal in all regards and better in many. I’m so sorry, for all that has been done to you and how you have suffered and endured.”

“Thank you, my dear cousin. It is good to speak of this.”

They talked late into the night and through the following days sometimes breaking off to cry for long periods and sometimes playing games and laughing hysterically as they had done as children.

After three days, Natasha told Lillya about seeing Yuri in prison and making peace with him. She told Lillya that he was executed and that this was even during the time that Lillya was herself in Peter and Paul Prison which Natasha had not learned until later. But if she had known Lillya was in prison, she would not have visited her. It would have been too painful and there was nothing she could have done.

“Do you know what happened to Michael, my father?” Natasha asked after a few days.

“No, just that he must have been captured by the Reds about the same time I was. Maybe he escaped or paid them off somehow. Maybe he was

simply executed on the spot. That's all I know about Anton, for that matter. It's a complete mystery to me."

Both went silent over these newly remembered losses. Eventually, Lillya spoke again.

"How's your mother?"

"Dead, of course, but she lived until 1915 and had a happy life in Odessa, though she never married or had any more children. She helped me raise my children and that gave her much joy."

"Let me tell you how I plan to get you out of here." So, Natasha began to tell the story of the Americans sending supplies to Russia via Arkangelsk and how she could get Lillya on a ship to America.

A few days later they were on a train to Arkangelsk where Natasha expected to find a certain American named Colonel Barstow and secure passage for Lillya. As the train neared the port there was a delay – something with the rails they said, and the train stood in place while hours slipped away, and they feared Lillya would miss her ship to America. While they waited a few Komi sleighs pulled up to the train offering food to the travelers and Natasha saw her chance. She jumped from the train and had an animated conversation with one of the Komi. She turned and waved to

Lillya, urging her to come down to the sleigh. When Lillya got there, they packed her into the sleigh and Natasha began driving the reindeer out across the snow-covered expanse toward their destination. They were joined by a caravan of eight and drove until late in the night while the sun was still low in the sky but when it set and the moon failed to rise, they were overwhelmed by the hallucinatory beauty of the Aurora Borealis – ribbons of green, blue and violet light shimmering across the entire sky and reflecting off the endless flat table of snow.

As they approached the coast they could see miles upon miles of parked trucks, pallets of rolled aluminum, acres of stacked tires and other military supplies. Even though she had helped make the deal for these goods, Natasha was still astonished by the massive size of this delivery.

When they arrived at the docks, the last ship was slowly pulling away and their hearts sank. They watched, tearfully as the freighter slid out of the port and into the White Sea. Natasha began calling for Colonel Barstow, but he was nowhere to be seen. Finally, they gave up screaming and turned back toward the village when an American army Jeep pulled up and Colonel Barstow stepped out.

“Natasha! We couldn’t hold the boat any longer. I’m very sorry. There won’t be another voyage until next Spring.”

“I understand. The fates were not smiling on us today.” Heartbroken, she introduced him to Lillya and told him her story.

“You know,” he said smiling bemusedly at their grief, “if she doesn’t mind being strapped into a seat for ten hours, she can fly back to Scotland with me and hitch a ride to Canada with the pilots returning from ferrying bombers over to the British.”

Natasha and Lillya were stunned speechless by their reversal of fortune.

Chapter 50

Petrograd, September 1914

Lillya read about the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. There were rumors that this could spark a war between the Central Powers of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the alliance of France and England. How could Russia be pulled into this? What side would they even be on? Nicholas II was the cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm, the monarch of Germany. There was a delightfully silly photo of them each dressed up in the military uniform of the other's country. Russians couldn't fight Germans; our own empress was a German.

And yet, for reasons that still baffled her, the Tsar lined up on the side of the French and English, purportedly on the grounds of Slavic solidarity with the rebel Serbs. In a matter of months, the country was mobilized for war. Maybe the leaders thought it was a welcome distraction from Russia's internal strife, maybe they wanted so much to be loved by the French and Germans they would abandon their principles and sanity and go to war with old friends and relatives.

The war began in late August with a disastrous offensive against the Germans at Tannenberg. Pulled quickly into fighting, the Russian 2nd Army was almost completely destroyed with as many casualties coming from the

tick-borne disease Typhus as actual combat. Soldiers lacked guns and ammunition and were constantly under assault from the German's powerful artillery and machine-gun fire.

More defeats and worsening hunger fueled public outrage. No longer trusting the competence of his own generals, the Tsar himself took command of the army and left the governance of the country to his wife Alexandra who was preoccupied with the health of her son Alexei, the heir to the empire.

Yuri's townhouse, October 1916

Yuri, Anton and Lillya realized that if they were to pass their family fortune on to Vladimir and his children that they would have to find a way to get some of their wealth to America soon, but this was not a simple matter. The Okhrana, the Tsar's secret police, monitored the movement of large amounts of money out of the State Bank and the private commercial banks. Sending a large amount of gold to America was expensive and risky and would be deemed highly suspicious. They decided to convert a substantial amount of money into precious gems and send them by private courier to a bank in Charleston, South Carolina, a small city in the southern United

States that Vladimir was familiar with and would be easy for him to visit by train.

They raised cash by selling several parcels of land and their remaining shares in a textile firm run by Lillya's friend Pelé Petrovsky, the father of Donatalia and widowed husband of Katya. At the time, 100 Russian rubles could be exchanged for about 50 US dollars. They decided to initially send 120 thousand rubles or 60 thousand dollars – equivalent to a metric ton of gold at the fixed price of \$20.67 US – more than enough to set up Vladimir and his circus for life.

Yuri was a regular customer of the famed House of Fabergé but decided that purchasing such a large volume of jewels from them would be too conspicuous. Instead, they chose the House of Bolin. Edward Bolin was a jeweler to the royal court and an old family friend. He personally assisted them in selecting gems, necklaces and brooches containing diamonds, sapphires, rubies and emeralds. Bolin thought their strategy was quite shrewd, since a one carat diamond weighed just two tenths of a gram but was worth about a kilogram of gold. They could literally pack diamonds worth a ton of gold in a pouch weighing only 200 grams, about as heavy as a potato. Bolin suggested one of his most trusted assistants, a certain André Timashev, could make the voyage to America with the jewels safely stored

in a money belt that would never leave his waist. Yuri agreed to pay Timashev a handsome sum and give him a first-class ticket to America and back. Timashev had a wife and children in St. Petersburg and was sure to perform his duty and return promptly with the receipt from the bank. Lillya reluctantly parted with pearl necklaces, ruby and sapphire brooches and a diamond tiara she had been given by the Tsarina, better that they be worn by her granddaughters the Queens than hidden in a Russian vault.

The arrangements were made and Timashev set off for Charleston. Because Russia was still at war with Germany, the only way to travel to the US was via the Russian port of Arkhangelsk on the White Sea across from Finland. Timashev would take a train to Moscow and then on to the port and make the crossing on the *SS Tsar*. Tragically, a few days later it was learned that he had been murdered in Moscow where he had stopped to change trains. Of course, the jewels were never found, and no claim could be made for them. One could only imagine that word of his precious belt had somehow leaked out and made him a target of jewel thieves – or perhaps just a lucky random robber. This was a crushing blow to all involved.

Yuri offered to compensate Andrés family but received a surprising counteroffer from his eldest son Mikhail and his widow – they would agree to take another package of jewels to America if he would finance moving the

entire family to the US and setting them up comfortably. A woman with six children ranging in age from 12 to 25 would be much less vulnerable than one man traveling alone and this time they would sew the jewels into their garments and keep a tight lid on their secret. Yuri agreed. They got together a similar package, and the family soon departed for America. After a fretful month of waiting, they received a letter via courier containing a receipt from the South Carolina National Bank of Charleston, a key to a safe deposit box there and the front page of the Charleston Evening Post dated September 13, 1916, as proof of their safe arrival and fidelity.

Soon afterwards, Lillya composed a letter:

October 23, 1916

Dearest Vladimir,

We have come to believe that our Russia, the Russia you were raised in and taught to hold in high esteem, will soon be no longer.

We hired at a considerable sum a man – who for obvious reasons will remain nameless – to make a delivery to a bank in Charleston, South Carolina. The bank is located at the corner of Broad and State Streets. This key will unlock a box registered in your name and inside you will find our gift. In case something happens to us, this should secure your future and that of the circus.

Presently, Russia is dangerous, and travel is out of the question. When this upheaval comes to a peaceful end, we will reunite, if possible. Be safe, son, and give our love to your wife and family. You are in our hearts.

Your loving parents

She didn't say that this shipment cost one man his life and brought about the moving of his family to America. At least now she could rest assured that her family in America would have all the money they needed to live a very comfortable life. The Timashev's later wrote that they very much liked Charleston, bought a nice home there in The Battery and set up a jewelry store on a fashionable block south of Broad Street.

Petrograd, January 1917

Lillya and Anton arrived for the holiday celebration at the Winter Palace. The death of the healer Rasputin was casting a pall over the Tsar's household, but most of the other nobles thought it was a cause for celebration. Lillya knew it was politic for them to make an appearance, but the Tsar and Tsarina would likely remain in their private chambers with their children. She requested a short audience with Empress Alexandra and her children to express her sympathy and concern but was turned away, like many other friends of the family.

Chapter 51

Arkangelsk, September 1941

Lillya and Natasha spent their last night together in an empty American barracks at the port. This surprise gave them one last night together and with that came a boldness on Lillya's part to learn something that had gnawed at her ever since she learned that Michael was Natasha's father. How did Natasha come to be and why was she treated as a servant, not as the cousin she actually was?

Natasha was at first startled by the question, but she acknowledged that she had started wondering about her father as a teenager. She knew that she and Lillya had different stations in life, despite their strong bond, but being such an important part of Lillya's household, it didn't occur to her until she was 13 or 14 that she must have a father somewhere, too. The more she wondered about it, the more often the question would bubble up in her consciousness. She had asked her mother once, but she and her mother weren't accustomed to serious conversations, and Sonya waved her off instead of answering. Natasha was surprised at how angry those interactions made her. She had a right to know where she came from.

The question had come up in conversation with Lillya, too. After Natasha had gotten no answer from her mother, she confided in Lillya. The

two had imagined all kinds of situations that could have led to Natasha's conception and all kinds of men that could possibly be her father. What if her father was really the Tsar? They giggled with glee at the thought that Natasha may actually have royal blood. Or maybe the awful baker who would notoriously sneer and bark at the servants who would go there to buy the bread for the day? Natasha cringed. Surely her father was a good man, someone worthy of respect. There must be a reason he wasn't around—a good reason, if it meant leaving his daughter in the care of Yuri. Or maybe... was it something about *her* that made her father leave? The thought made Natasha's heart sink, and she told Lillya that she didn't want to talk about it anymore. "At least we'll always have each other," Lillya had said, grasping Natasha's hands in hers. Natasha was partly convinced, but still had a gaping hole in her heart wondering about her father. When she was torn away from Lillya, that hole gaped all the wider.

In Odessa, Natasha faced her mother with the question again, but this time she was even more desperate to get the information out of her, and more angrily insistent. She simply had to know, and her mother would tell her this time, it was as simple as that. Natasha was convinced that some deep truth would come to light as soon as she knew her father's identity, and she simply couldn't go any longer without knowing.

Seeing the desperation and insistence in her daughter's eyes, Sonya knew she couldn't hold it back any longer. She sighed. "My darling, sit down. Let me tell you how you came to be." Natasha sat at her mother's feet, holding her hand, tears in both their eyes.

"I've never spoken of it, but I think you've always known that I am Komi," she said, referring to the indigenous Finnic people of the North. "When you were very young, I spoke to you in Komi and sang you Komi lullabies. Don't you remember them?" She sang a few bars of a Komi tune. Natasha's eyes widened in her sudden comprehension and tiny tears emerged from their corners. "Komi was your first language, but you have always been good at picking up new tongues."

Sonya spoke affectionately of growing up in the Komi village of Kudymkar near Perm. She was the daughter of a Komi reindeer herder named Viktor and his wife Elena. When she was 7-years old, her parents sent her to the Orthodox school for Komi children in Perm where she learned to read and write Russian and a variety of domestic trades. She was a good pupil and very pretty.

"Your grandparents helped me care for you in our village until you were four. Do you remember my father taking you for rides in our sleigh or helping him tend to the reindeer?" Sonya went to a drawer and took out a

colorful Komi shawl. “My mother gave this to me when we left. You can have it now. Would you like it?” Natasha took the shawl and wrapped herself in it.

Sonya continued, “I was sent to Yuri by the school in Perm. He hired me to help clean out his family’s old mansion in Perm while he oversaw new construction at the family’s coal mine. When he was about to return to St. Petersburg, he invited me to join him, and I eagerly accepted.

“He had been courting your mother Angelika before he left and when he returned, he presented me to her as a gift. I served as Angelika’s favored Lady’s Maid and quickly became her confidante. Yuri’s greatest rival for her affection was his cousin Michael.”

When Sonya first said Michael’s name she paused and couldn’t speak for a moment. Sonya would often accompany Angelika, Yuri and Michael on walks and to concerts and galleries. Sometimes Michael would speak directly to Sonya and even flirt with her to get Angelika’s attention. There was a lot of playful joking amongst them but as Angelika’s heart seemed to sway irretrievably toward Yuri, Michael grew anxious and did something foolish, something that could never be undone.

When she said this, Sonya began tearing up again and needed to walk away. Natasha followed her outside. She was not angry with Michael,

perhaps she was even still in love with him after all that had passed. Angelika could see immediately that Sonya was not familiar with these matters and was appalled by what Michael had done. Yuri shared Angelika's concern for Sonya, saddened that his bringing her from Perm had led to this.

When Sonya showed her first signs of pregnancy Angelika set her up to stay with a family of domestic servants they knew in St. Petersburg. When Natasha was born, Angelika, who was herself then pregnant with Lillya, came to accompany Sonya to a foundling home where she could put Natasha up for adoption. But when Angelika saw the condition of the home and realized that very few of the infant girls were adopted or even survived, she held Natasha in her arms and told Yuri that this Englehardt daughter needed to stay in the family.

Yuri was befuddled but decided that they could send Sonya and Natasha back to Perm to live with Sonya's parents. When Michael learned of all this, he was annoyed at first, but ultimately grateful to Yuri and Angelika.

Michael saw Sonya and the infant one more time before they returned to Perm and tried clumsily to explain why she and Natasha could not stay with him. He had become engaged to someone else, an heiress named Margaretta, but the pain he felt saying goodbye to his daughter made him secretly vow to care for his future children better than he had Natasha.

A few years later, Angelika felt that she could not bear another child and recalled Sonya and Natasha to St. Petersburg so that Lillya, who had no siblings, could grow up with her cousin as a childhood companion, even though Natasha's parentage could not be acknowledged.

Natasha smiled and said that in the first years she lived in Odessa she would get lost in her own mind. She had always thought she would stick with Lillya, perhaps moving into a new home with her once Lillya married. She had never even considered marrying herself. Natasha shook her head, in those days all I could think was "*Who would want to marry an illegitimate handmaid?*"

In a few hours, they said one last tearful goodbye and Lillya boarded the plane, never to see Russia again.

Ascending in the airplane was the most astonishing and euphoric experience of Lillya's life. Looking out over the vast expanses of earth and sea made her feel as though she was being transported to another world and of course, she was.

Gander Newfoundland, September 1941

Lillya's plane landed at Gander in Newfoundland, Canada. When she stepped out of the plane, trembling and weakened by many long cold hours strapped into a tiny seat, she was met by a group of US Army officers who took her into a small military hut where she tried unsuccessfully to communicate with them in broken French and English, saying simply "circus of queens" over and over again to the complete befuddlement of her hosts.

Eventually, a 19-year-old Russian boy in a US Army uniform was brought in to ask her questions on behalf of his American superiors. She was interrogated about Russia and her reasons for coming to the US until she could no longer stay awake despite drinking cup after welcome cup of hot coffee and even smoking cigarettes again after more than 20 years.

Savannah, GA, September 1941

After a week in Canada, Lillya was flown to the US Naval Air Station in Charleston, South Carolina. The Navy confirmed the existence of a woman named Donatalia Petrovskaya and a former circus known as the *Circus of the Queens*. A few military people spoke around her and over her head about what to do next when one of them picked up a telephone and called the operator for Savannah, after a few minutes of chatter from which

Lillya could only make out a few references to a circus and Russians, he covered the mouthpiece of the phone and asked her, “Do you know someone named Donatella?”

Lillya was baffled for a moment and then screamed out “Donatalia!” The officer said, “Sounds close enough.” Then he spoke into the mouthpiece again, “There’s someone here who wants to speak with you.” and handed Lillya the phone. Donatalia said “Hello, this is Donatalia.” cautiously into the phone in English only to have Lillya burst into tears and begin speaking rapidly in Russian. She couldn’t hold herself back and would have told Donatalia her entire life story if the officer hadn’t taken the phone back from her and gotten some more information from Donatalia. He then arranged for her to be brought to the farm in Savannah the next day.

A short time later she was driven by a boyish Corporal Fitzsimmons in a US Army Jeep to Donatalia’s doorstep. Her granddaughter Ann Marie Heart met her at the door holding in her arms the baby Scarlett, her first great granddaughter. Lillya was overcome with joy. The Corporal Fitzsimmons put small bags, which included some trinkets and gifts from her hosts in Canada and departed while they stood there staring in amazement, barely able to exchange affections. Donatalia arrived and welcomed them in.

Lillya was served delicious southern fried chicken and numerous other unfamiliar dishes by Donatalia's housekeeper Polly and could barely tell her stories while marveling at the room and land around them. After lunch Ann Marie's husband Kyle and their young son Kyle Jr join them and Lillya is quite taken by their charm and grace. Vladimir's wife Bella had just returned from Italy and is herself filled with joy to meet Lillya. Donatalia's husband Marvin was running errands in town and would join them for dinner.

Lillya was exhausted but still too excited to sleep, so Donatalia showed her around the farm and introduced her to the remaining circus animals, especially the elephants Emily and Bess. Lillya asked about Midnight and Satin but, of course, they had both passed away years before.

Finally, Donatalia showed her the flower garden and where Vladimir and Spade were buried. She knelt at their graves and when she arose, she asked if she too could be buried there. "Of course, you can," Donatalia told her, "But that won't happen anytime soon." Lillya laughed that she would have so much longer to live after seeing the passing of her husband, son and granddaughter. *What kind of good luck is this*, she thought.

Chapter 52

Petrograd, February 1917

Natasha stood along the front of the surging line of protesters at the Narva Gate. They faced a long line of soldiers with rifles drawn. A proud captain of the Volhynian Lifeguard Regiment of the Imperial Guard rode his grandly costumed stallion out in front of them and brandished his saber. After several stern orders to the crowd to retreat went unheeded, the officer raised his pistol in preparation for the order to fire. The line of soldiers raised their rifles evoking the horrible memories of 1905. But this time, before the order to fire could be given, one brave unknown son of Russia, some anonymous Alex, Pasha or Peter, defied his captain and defied his Tsar by firing his rifle into the air. And with that one brave man's act of courage, the spell of the Romanov's was broken. The officer swung around and aimed his pistol at the offending soldier but as he did one, then another, then all the other soldiers in the line fired into the air in a breathtaking cascade of defiance. The officer abruptly pulled back his pistol. Seeing the rifles of the line now pointed toward him, he spurred his horse to gallop and quickly rode away. The crowd cheered. The demonstrators ran to embrace the soldiers in celebration. They knew immediately that the revolution had succeeded.

Three long centuries of Romanov rule were over, and, for a moment, all the people of Russia were free.

Chaos reigned as 60,000 soldiers and officers of the Petrograd Garrison mutinied and took control of the arsenal, the police and the main government ministries. Tsar Nicholas quickly returned to Petrograd, but it was too late, all he could do was abdicate and give control of the country over to a provisional government run by the Duma. The Germans sent Lenin back to Petrograd. Some saw this as a cynical ploy to get the Russians out of the war. Nonetheless, the Bolsheviks welcomed him back and he led them with fervor.

Yuri was a member of the Duma from the Constitutional Democratic Party also known as the Cadets, a progressive party of professionals and intellectuals.

Lillya didn't follow politics that closely but agreed with her father on most issues and obviously believed that Russia needed a Tsar and royal family, the same way Britain needed its King and Germany its Kaiser. Though she did agree that the country needed a stronger parliament and that perhaps Nicholas II had not been as sensitive to the people's needs as he should have been.

Anton was skeptical of governments in general and steered clear of all political conversations, in part because his employees in the circus had wide ranging views and he was sympathetic to all of their feelings.

The wild card was the army. The pre-war army of volunteers and professional soldiers had mostly been killed or wounded by 1917 and a new army of conscripts who were both younger and older than regular soldiers had taken their place. They joined with workers in the Petrograd Soviet and brought about Order Number One, an edict that allowed army units to elect representatives to the soviets and demanded that officers no longer had to be addressed as “Your Excellency” but rather as “Sir” and required officers to address soldiers using the formal “vy” instead of “ty” and only require saluting when on duty. In general, this democratization of the army led to a breakdown in discipline including the execution of disliked and distrusted officers. The country was in complete disarray. Soldiers deserted en masse and returned to their families leaving hollowed out units at the front and a rebellion among the troops in the capital.

On October 24th, after months of street skirmishes between the various factions the Provisional Government’s police raided the Bolshevik newspaper offices, smashing machinery and presses. Stalin escaped with one

of the printing presses and joined Lenin in a meeting of the Central Committee in the Smolny Institute just a few kilometers from the Winter Palace. Trotsky and some of the other Mensheviks who had previously resisted the use of violence to overthrow the provisional government agreed now that a coup was the only way to bring an end to the war and the ongoing madness.

That night Natasha served as one of many translators and interpreters to the Central Committee as they directed Bolshevik militia units to seize the Petrograd electric power station, main post office, state bank, telephone exchange and several bridges. A ship they controlled, the *Aurora*, sailed up the Neva and opened fire on the Winter Palace as militia members stormed the building. The Provisional Government's delegates, Yuri Englehardt among them, surrendered and were arrested. Alexander Kerensky, their Prime Minister, managed to escape.

Petrograd, November 1917

The Petrovsky & Sutton Spinnery was now run by a committee of workers, and they took more interest in the political activity of its members than the production of quality textiles. Pelé had resisted at first but once the police and the army had gone over to the other side, there was no one to

defend the rich the nobles and bourgeoisie from the hungry, angry mob that now felt entitled to take anything and everything that had belonged to someone who had more than they had. His own home was invaded by a mob that proceeded to move in four families of strangers. He considered himself lucky to still live there in the old servants' quarters. One of his new neighbors was a former tailor named Pavel who had been an admirer of the cotton cloth made by the Petrovsky & Sutton Spinnery. He had sympathy for Pelé and took an interest in his well being.

On one occasion Pelé told him all about his daughter Donatalia who he had sent to America many years before, who had been a very talented ballet dancer but sadly broke her leg on the voyage and now survived as a fortune-teller in the *Circus of the Queens* that toured the southern United States. He told Pavel how much he missed her and how proud he was of her.

Well into his fifties now with a life spent working on a factory floor, drinking and smoking too much, Pelé fainted one day while shouting at the Bolshevik who'd fallen asleep in his favorite chair. Mme. Strachkov and her sister were called and together they carried him to the street and hailed a carriage to take him to a doctor. The emergency room looked like a military field hospital with sick and injured people crowding all the rooms and hallways. After a few hours, an exhausted female doctor assessed that he

would be dead soon and not worth a bed but after a day passed and he still hung onto life they assigned him a cot in an enormous overflowing ward of coughing, wheezing and crying peasants, revolutionaries and nobles. They fed him when they could and eventually, he felt well enough to leave under his own power. Madame had come to visit him in the hospital every day for a month and implored him to move in with her and her sister but the day before he was to be released she must have been distracted by all her plans and preparation because she walked out in front of a horse and carriage going at a rather fast clip and was killed instantly. When he was given the news, it was too much sorrow for Pelé to take. He walked out of the hospital a broken man and never returned to his old home. That afternoon he walked through the streets of Petrograd until he reached his beloved factory, his spinnery. The floors were littered and the machines he nurtured like children now sat in disrepair and neglect. He ached to see bales of fine cotton decomposing in the storage bins because there was no one to wash and process it, let alone turn it into crisp white sheets or fine garments. He walked up and down the production lines, unrecognized and barely noticed until he sat down on a workman's bench and had a heart attack. He died quickly and silently among the machines that were all that he had left of a

family thinking in the end of his beloved wife Katya and the daughter Donatalia he saw off to America twelve years before.

A few weeks later, noticing that he had not returned, Pavel penned a letter to Donatalia hoping that it would find her if he addressed it simply, *Circus of the Queens*, c/o General Post Office, Charleston, South Carolina, USA.

Yuri's Townhouse, Petrograd, April 1918

Eventually, the Red Army arrived at the door of Yuri's townhouse and ordered him to vacate the property as it was being seized by the new Bolshevik government. He packed a single bag and made it out to the country estate with a few suits of clothing, some of his late wife Angelika's jewelry and photographs of her and his daughter Lillya with her husband Anton and his grandson Vladimir when he was a child.

Fortunately, he saw that Lillya and her husband were sent off to safety in the east. In short order, the Bolsheviks began rounding up the landowners and nobles in the vicinity of the city. The Tsar and his family were moved from Tsarkoye Selo to a location east of the Urals to take them out of play while the Reds fought the remnants of the Imperial Army and other monarchists.

Yuri was eventually arrested at his estate, as he had expected, and unceremoniously taken into custody. A fledgling judge of the new regime, a beardless young man with poor grammar and shabby clothes beneath his torn, food-spattered robe read out the indictment with a haughty leering tone.

“Yuri Englehardt, you stand here accused of being an enemy of the socialist revolution that has liberated the people of Russia from the oppressive regime of Tsar Nicholas II. You have abused the privileges granted to you and your family and stolen land, wealth and resources from the people of Russia. What say you to these charges?”

Standing handcuffed before a minor magistrate new to his position and role, he made the case for his own freedom.

“My family has served the Tsars and the people of Russia since the 13th Century. In 1714, Peter the Great gave my ancestors the property we now inhabit as payment for service in the war against the Swedes that led to the founding of our city. We have been good stewards of the land and fair masters of our serfs and servants. When Alexander II freed the serfs in 1862, I was only 14, but my family happily liberated the thousands of serfs that had worked our lands and mines and served our community for generations. We opened schools to educate them and their children and even sent the most able of them to study at universities. Even now, we welcome into our

home the families of former serfs that work the lands we granted to them along with the lands my family has retained. I pledge my loyalty to the new government of Russia and its people.”

The magistrate chuckled, “You were a member of the Duma and possess wealth beyond comprehension. You resisted the revolution and sought to arrest and murder its leader. You are a stain on the fabric of Russia.” He pronounced Yuri guilty of all charges and ordered him to be held at Peter and Paul Prison pending execution. As he was escorted out a neighbor and Duma compatriot was moved into the dock.

Peter and Paul Prison, October 1918

When Natasha showed up at the door of Yuri’s cell, she was wearing the uniform of a Red Army Major. She had been awarded a medal and a promotion for her exploits on the Northern Front. At first, Yuri couldn’t recognize her and wondered what this officer had come to do to him.

“Yuri Englehardt, you are a prisoner of the People of Russia. I have come to speak with you for the purpose of gaining information to benefit the revolution.” The guard opened the door and admitted Natasha to his cell. She motioned to the guard to leave them alone.

“Do you recognize me, Yuri?” He looked closely at her face but the thirty years that separated their last meeting made it impossible for him to recall who she was. She removed her cap and shook her short mane of salt and pepper hair. “When you said goodbye to my mother and me, I’m sure you never expected to see me again.”

Perhaps it was her voice or a small facial gesture, but a light flickered on in his memory and his eyes widened. “Natasha? Natasha! It’s you. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I... I...”

Natasha became uncomfortable with his crying and stammering. “Yuri, I have not come to help you. There is nothing I can do or say to alter your fate. I have only come to settle some questions. First of all, who is my father?”

Yuri is shaken and unable to speak except to feign ignorance. “I don’t know, I’m sorry, but I don’t know.”

“Are you, my father?”

“No. No. Of course, not. How would you even think that?”

“Is your cousin Michael my father?”

Now, Yuri is sweating despite the cold and uncertain about what to say.

“Why do you say that? What have you heard?”

“My mother tells me that Michael is my father, but I was not sure. Now, I believe that is more likely.”

Yuri asks her, “Do you know where he is? Is he alive?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

“Lillya? Do you know what has happened to Lillya and her husband, Anton?”

“I don’t. If I did, I would tell you. There is little that I know and less that I can do.”

“I’m so sorry for everything that I did to you. I wanted to right a wrong, but there was no way to do it painlessly. I only ask that you now try to forgive me and not think ill of my daughter who always loved you dearly.”

“I no longer bear you any ill will. You did what you thought you needed to do in the circumstances. My life could have been much worse without your intervention. I must leave you now. There is nothing else to say.”

She nods her head toward him. He wanted to reach his arms out to embrace her, but that would not have been appropriate. He nodded and his eyes filled with tears. She left the cell shaken and sad for Yuri and her

country and what the coming years might bring now that the Bolsheviks had assumed power.

As they spoke, Lillya walked the prison yard, appreciating her few minutes of daily sunlight. The next day Yuri was executed by firing squad and buried in a mass grave on the prison grounds.

After they were captured in Kungar, Anton and Father Nikolai were forced into service in the Red Army and were killed in action fighting the Czech Army on the Eastern Front. Lillya never learned their fates. Michael was deemed too old and unfit for military service and was executed by a pistol shot to his head. The Reds gleefully confiscated most of the group's hidden wealth in jewels and gold coins, but Gretta still managed to keep some secreted away.

Gretta returned to Petrograd and brought Helena and Lana with her. They lived there until 1941, when they were killed by German bombing. Lillya, recalling how they had run away from her that day in Petrograd, wondered if they had been complicit in her being identified and captured, but she never learned the truth.

Epilogue

Donatalia's farm, Savannah, GA, Thanksgiving 1941

Donatalia and Ann Marie Heart were cutting peaches and pears for Thanksgiving dinner. A turkey was roasting in the oven – for the first time in three years. Kyle, Jr., and his sister Scarlett played with carved wooden toys on the dining room floor.

Lillya came downstairs, her hair wet and wrapped in a towel from her shower, too curious and aroused by the sounds of cooking and conversation to remain in her bedroom. She smiled with deep delight at the sights and smells of this peculiar American holiday that she was celebrating for the first time.

From the kitchen, Donatalia called to Lillya, “There’s a nice dress of Irena’s laid out for you on my bed. Help yourself to any of my jewelry. Just be back downstairs in 15 minutes.” Lillya went back upstairs to Donatalia and Marvin’s bedroom to put on the dress lent to her by Donatalia’s late mentor and benefactor. The dress was an ornate Russian gown from the last century. Lillya felt like she was once again dressing for dinner at the Winter Palace. Then she noticed the contents of a jewelry box and one particular item stood out to her. She donned some stylish modern earrings and put the familiar looking item on the dresser top. When she got downstairs, she told

Donatalia that she saw an emerald brooch in her jewelry chest that reminded her of one she had long ago.

“It should look familiar; you gave it to my mother years ago and she passed it on to me. There’s quite a story to go along with it, too. Remind me to tell you about it later.” Lillya turned ashen. Was this the same emerald brooch she had been given by Laurent?

After a sumptuous Thanksgiving feast Lillya eagerly awaited Donatalia’s story of the brooch. She told her all about her interactions with Herve Laurent Fleury from the encounter on the steamship when she broke her leg to the poker game with Vladimir and the misadventures with the elephants Emily and Bess. Later, she showed her the letter Herve gave her when he returned the brooch just a few years ago, before he returned to France. Lillya trembled with a combination of anger and fear. She poured over the letter. It began,

Dear Donatalia, or is it Donatella now? My full name is Herve Laurent Fleury. I bought this for whom I thought would be the love of my life, Lillya. I gave it to her the day we took vows in the forest....

Lillya began to weep and then growl and spit with ferocious anger as she poured over the rest of the letter and discovered what Herve had done in

his bitterness over losing her. Donatalia stood near trembling and stunned into silence.

Later Harsita joined them and reported that Herve had returned from France last year after the German invasion and now ran a small riding academy in Charleston. Lillya asked Harsita to take her there the following Monday.

Lillya and Harsita found seats in the bleachers and watched as Herve Laurent Fleury, now known as Larry Flowers, put a young brother and sister through their paces. The proud parents clapped, and Laurent walked over to them. After chatting for a few minutes with the mom and dad, he came over to Lillya and Harsita. “Looking to get riding lessons for your young fella,” he asks Lillya, not at all recognizing her from over 50 years before. In her still excellent French, Lillya replied, “Not at all, Laurent. Surely, you know that I can teach him dressage quite well myself.” Laurent sat up, frozen upon his horse, and stared intently at Lillya.

“Lillya?” Laurent began to tremble as she looked at him somewhat ruefully. “Is it really you? What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, of course. I have something to return to you.” Lillya takes the emerald brooch out of her pocket and holds it out to him.

“But I...”

“Can you leave us for a moment, Harsita? I have a few things of a personal nature to discuss with Mr. Flowers.” Harsita stood up and walked away to look at some of the other horses in the stable. On his way out, he nodded to Laurent who suddenly recognized the young Indian man as Donatalia’s elephant mahout.

“I don’t want that now. I gave it back to Donatalia, you can have it or do whatever you want with it.”

“I have no interest in a cursed jewel that has brought so much pain to my loved ones and perhaps, to you, as well.” She let the brooch fall onto the dusty ground of the corral.

“I’m sorry, Lillya, I don’t fully know what got into me. I was overwhelmed by you, your beauty and your magical powers. I thought I meant something to you. I only ever wanted to bring you joy and happiness. But when that was not possible, I became bitter and jealous. It consumed me. Why did you never answer my letters or communicate with me? How could you have just disappeared like that, after we both swore vows of love?”

Lillya suddenly felt sorry for this pathetic looking old man. “I wrote to you several times and poured out my sorrow and anguish, but my father

never let my letters get to the post office nor did he ever let me receive any letters from you. He dismissed your brooch as a worthless bauble and told me to throw it away. If I had known... But I was so distressed then, you took me by surprise. I was only 16 Laurent! You were a grown man! I had promised my love to someone else, someone in Russia, long before I met you. I valued you, Laurent, I even cared for you, but not in that way. Not in a way that could cause me to abandon my previous life and become your wife. I'm sorry, but that was never possible, and I could never have explained it to you, not in that moment or ever. I was so young, in that moment I was helpless, even now, 50 years later I cannot see how I could have behaved differently. I was delirious but also mortified. My father thought he needed to rescue me from you, and he gave no consideration to your feelings or mine. He was cruel to both of us, and he has paid for his cruelty to you and others, of that I can assure you.”

Laurent was visibly moved by her words and looked into her eyes sheepishly with a combination of guilt and understanding.

“Why didn’t you just grow up, Laurent! Why didn’t you just tell yourself “C’est la vie”⁴ as you French always say and get on with your life?

⁴ That’s life.

I meant you no harm and did not intend to deceive you. I appreciated everything you taught me and put it to good use.”

“You did do that,” he quipped sarcastically back at her.

“As I should have, and as you must have intended, but just not in the service of your personal glory. I said I was sorry once; I won’t say it again.” With that Lillya got up to leave.

“No. No! Not like this, we can’t part like this. I have wanted my entire life to speak to you, but I never thought I would see you again. Now, to my astonishment, you are here, and I can’t let my life end like this. I loved you, Lillya, more than I thought I would ever love another human being and more than I have loved anyone since, but I understand now. It was not meant to be. You were never meant to be mine and I accept that now, after so many years of anger and bitterness. Forgive me. You meant me no harm. I am so sorry for all the pain my vain jealousy and heartbreak caused.” He turned away to hide the tears streaming down his face.

Lillya now cried herself, thinking of all that transpired between them and what it meant to her life. “I forgive you. I’m sorry, this should never have caused us all so much pain. It was just a simple misunderstanding. You didn’t understand and I couldn’t explain it to you. Not then.”

They sat in silence, breathing slowly and deeply to settle the feelings that had festered and roiled within them for half a century.

After a moment, he looked up at her and smiled. "Do you still ride?" Lillya wiped away a tear and brightened. "Of course, I still ride." "Then here, take a turn with my fine Kentucky Quarter Horse, Bourbon." He got off his horse and offered her the reins.

"He is quite a fine looking fellow." Lillya walked down from the bleachers, took the reins of the horse and climbed onto the saddle. After she whispered in his ear, she gave him a command and off she went, cantering around the rink. Laurent broke into a big smile as his prize pupil displayed her gifts and knowledge still obvious at the age of 71.

She looked back and smiled at him, seeing again the earnest young Frenchman who had taught her this marvelous way of riding and communicating with horses, the magical creatures she had loved since childhood.

The End

The Emerald's Story

The emerald was mined from the Panjshir Valley of Afghanistan, cut in Bombay, mounted into the ornate silver brooch in Constantinople and acquired in a trade involving horses and camels by an Ottoman Sultan. It was stolen from the Sultan's palace by a Cossack and acquired by Laurent's patron the old soldier when he fought at the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean war when he took it from the dead body of the Russian cavalry officer.

Lillya and Laurent forgot the brooch and left it on the ground. It was later found by a pupil of the riding academy who turned it into Lost and Found. Laurent wouldn't claim it, so it was eventually donated to a church benefit sale and bought by a sailor for his sweetheart before he was shipped out to the Pacific. His beloved wore it every day as a good luck charm, and it brought him home safe and sound. They married, had four children and lived happily ever after, bequeathing the brooch to their eldest daughter. The emerald did not bare misfortune, it acted as a lens to focus the intention of the person who gave it. When given and received with love, it worked its protecting magic but when it became an object of bitterness and resentment, it bore a curse.

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