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THE  
PORCELAIN DOLL

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## PROLOGUE

**I**N SOME FARAWAY KINGDOM, IN SOME LONG-AGO LAND, there lived a young girl who looked just like her porcelain doll. The same rusty-gold hair. The same dark-wine eyes. The girl's own mother could hardly tell them apart. But they were never apart, for the girl always held the doll at her side, to keep it from the clutches of her many, many siblings.

The family lived in a dusky-pink house by the river, and in the evenings, the children liked to gather around the old stove and listen to their mother tell stories. Stories of kingdoms even further away and lands even longer ago, when there had been kings and queens living in castles; stories of how those castles had been swept away into the midnight-black sea. The many, many siblings would drift away to sleep on these stories, and then the mother

would take the girl and the doll into her lap and tell tales of the girl's father. He'd had the same rusty-gold hair, the same dark-wine eyes, in some other faraway kingdom, in some other long-ago land.

But one evening after supper, as the stove simmered and the samovar sang and the mother spoke and the children listened, there came the sound of footsteps outside the house. *Stomp-stomp-stomp*.

There came a knock on the dusky-pink door. *Rap-rap-rap*.

There came a man's voice, which had no colour at all. *Open, open, open!*

The mother opened the door. Two men stood there, each carrying rifles.

'You will come with us,' said the men to the mother.

The mother hung her head so that her children could not see her cry. But the samovar ceased to sing and the stove ceased to simmer and the story stayed untold, and in the silence, the many, many siblings could hear their mother's tears fall to the ground. They ran to stop the men.

*Stop-stop-stop!*

*Bang-bang-bang.*

The siblings fell like their mother's tears. Their bodies lay as quiet and as still as the doll that the girl held.

'Is that another one?' said one of the men to the other, pointing to the girl, who had remained by the stove.

'Those are just dolls,' said the other man to the first.

The men took the mother with them. Their footsteps began to fade. *Stomp-stomp-sto . . .* The mother's cries seemed far away and long ago. *No, no, no . . .* The girl began to breathe again. *In, out, in.* She stood, with her doll beneath her arm, and she walked, across the blood-red

floor, over her blood-red siblings, through the blood-red door, out of the blood-red house, all the way to the blood-red river. She forgot to wash her blood-red hands.

For fear of those men, the girl did not stay at the river, nor did she stay in that land. For fear of those men, through all her years, along all her journeys, she carried her doll. But she carried it too long, so long that she could not tell the two of them apart any more either. So long that she could not be sure if she was the girl at all; if she was the one who was real.

# CHAPTER ONE

Rosie

London, June 1991

THE MAN I'VE COME TO SEE IS NEARLY A CENTURY OLD. White-haired and lean, with just a dash of his youthful film-star looks remaining, he sits alone onstage, drumming his fingers on his knees. His head is tilted back as he takes a hard look at the crowd, at the latecomers standing awkwardly in the aisles, their smiles sheepish. At the young couple who have brought their children, a toddler girl swinging her legs back and forth, and the older one, a boy, solemn-faced and motionless. At me.

Usually when two strangers make eye contact across a crowded room, one or both will look away, but neither of us do.

Alexey Ivanov will be reading tonight from his memoir, the slim, red-jacketed book sitting on a table next to his chair. I've read it so many times by now that I could mouth

it alongside him: *A hillside falls out of view, and voices, too, fall away . . . we are like castaways, adrift on a single piece of wreckage that is floating to sea, leaving behind everything that linked us to humanity . . .*

Alexey stands up. 'Thank you all for coming,' he says, with the knife-edge of an accent. 'And so I begin.'

*The Last Bolshevik* is an account of his time on Stalin's White Sea Canal, told in short-story form so that people don't forget to breathe as they're reading it. Today Alexey has chosen the tale of a work party's doomed expedition through a grim, wintry wilderness to build a road that no one would ever take. The holes that the prisoners dug were for themselves. It would be their only grave . . .

My hands feel clammy and heavy, and my toes begin to tingle in my boots. The middle-aged man seated next to me pulls his coat tighter around himself, while just up ahead, the young girl has stopped swinging her legs and is as straight-backed as her older brother.

In a lecture hall full of people, Alexey Ivanov has snuffed out every sound.

He reaches the end of the story and closes the book. 'I am open to questions,' he says.

There's a faint shuffling of feet. Somewhere in the back, someone coughs and a baby begins to fuss. A quick shushing by the mother follows. Alexey is preparing to settle back into his chair when the man next to me suddenly lifts a hand.

Alexey smiles broadly and gestures to the man. 'Go on.'

'My question is a wee bit personal,' says my neighbour, in a thick Scottish brogue. He shifts in his seat. 'I hope you don't mind . . .'

'Please.'

‘You dedicated this memoir to someone you only call “Kukolka”. Is there any chance you will share with us who that really was?’

The smile slides off Alexey Ivanov’s face. Without it he no longer looks like the famous dissident writer, the celebrated historian. He’s only an old man, stooping beneath the burden of over nine decades of life. He glances around the room once more, just as the baby, somewhere out there, lets out another startled cry.

Alexey’s gaze lands on me again for half a second before moving on.

‘Hers is a name I never speak aloud,’ he says. ‘And if I did, I would shout it.’

I leave my row and head for the stage. The audience is filtering out, but Alexey is still shaking hands, chatting with the organisers. I’ve read all his writing, mostly while hunched over in a reading room in the Bodleian, and this is the effect of those musty hours, that pure silence: no matter how human the man might look, Alexey Ivanov has become almost a mythical figure to me. A legend.

‘Hello there,’ he says, turning to me. He has a smile like a torchlight.

‘I enjoyed your reading so much, Mr Ivanov,’ I say, finding my voice. Maybe *enjoy* isn’t the right word, but he nods. ‘Your story is inspirational.’

I’d planned in advance to say this, but only after saying it do I realise how much I mean it.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

‘My name is Rosemary White. Rosie. I saw your advert in Oxford. I’m a postgraduate there.’ I cough. ‘You’re

looking for a research assistant, for the summer?’

‘I am,’ he says pleasantly. ‘Someone who can join me in Moscow.’

I loosen my hold on my handbag. ‘I’d be interested to apply, if the position’s still open.’

‘It most certainly is.’

‘I don’t have much experience in your field, but I’m fluent in Russian and English—’

‘I’ll be in Oxford on Thursday,’ he says. ‘Why don’t we meet up? I’d be happy to tell you more about it.’

‘Absolutely, thank you. Only I’m leaving tomorrow for Yorkshire to visit my fiancé’s grandmother. She lives alone. We visit once a month.’ I’m not sure why I’m spewing information like this. ‘I’ll be back by the weekend.’

‘This weekend, then,’ he says. His voice is mild. All around us is nothing but people talking and bantering, a pleasing hum, but there is something in Alexey’s eyes that suddenly makes me want to brace against a biting wind. Maybe the excerpt he just read out, the details of the White Sea, those barren roads, those long winters, is still too fresh in my mind. Maybe it’s all people ever see, when they look at him.

It’s past my mother’s bedtime by the time I make it back to her apartment, but there’s a sound coming from her room, a low moan.

I knock on her door. ‘Mum? You awake?’

Another half-smothered noise.

I push the door open. Mum’s bedroom is filthy and gloomy, and she matches it perfectly. Unwashed, unmoving, she is sitting up in bed, slouched against her pillows, the