



by  
OLGA WOJTAS



*Miss Blaine's*  
**PREFECT**  
*and the*  
**GOLDEN**  
**SAMOVAR**

CHAPTER  
1

“Who shall I say is calling?”

Madame Potapova’s major-domo didn’t even look at me, or at the letter of introduction I was waving, as he asked the question. He was too busy glaring at the doorman for letting me in, and at the footman for escorting me across the reception hall.

I announced myself in the Russian style of name and patronymic, and decided to play the exoticism card. “Shona Fergusovna from Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland. My father Fergus was president of the local heritage association in Morningside, Edinburgh’s most celebrated arrondissement. I arrived here yesterday and have come to pay my respects to Madame.”

Not a flicker. “I do not know whether Madame is accepting any more visitors this afternoon.”

“Well, why don’t you ask her?” I suggested. Madame Potapova was elderly, widowed and threw the best parties in Imperial Russia. I was on a mission which demanded that I wangle an invite to the party she would host that very evening.

But before the major-domo could reply, there was a piercing shriek from the top of the marble staircase and an elderly lady plummeted towards us in a flurry of black silk and taffeta.

I dashed over to try to cushion her fall, but I never got the chance. In the wake of the shriek came the scrape of metal on marble and the snap of bone. The gold chain on the lady’s lorgnette had caught on one of the banister’s artistic protuberances. The gold was obviously of excellent quality, since rather than the chain breaking, it was her neck that broke. She sprawled halfway down the staircase, her head lolling at a 90-degree angle.

“Is that Madame Potapova?” I asked the major-domo.

He nodded, piously crossing himself in the presence of death.

“I suppose that’ll be tonight’s party cancelled then?”

“Unfortunately so, but since your excellency was not invited, your excellency will not be greatly inconvenienced.”

He snapped his fingers to summon a footman. “Her excellency is leaving.”

I always try to see the best in people, but I couldn’t warm to this bloke. I was very glad I hadn’t mentioned what I thought I had seen. Just as Madame Potapova plunged to her doom, it was as though someone had moved on the upper landing, then disappeared into the shadows. I couldn’t be sure; time travel seemed to have left me with a bit of visual disturbance.

If I had said anything, I wouldn’t have put it past the major-domo to start yelling that Madame Potapova hadn’t fallen, she had been pushed. Then some innocent chambermaid or footman who just happened to be in the vicinity would have been executed for murder. I deal in facts, not fancies. And it’s a sad fact that a lot of elderly people don’t exercise enough to retain good balance.

The footman escorted me across the reception hall and the doorman opened the door.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m sorry you’re out of a job.”

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The doorman's brow creased. "Your excellency?"

"Now that your employer's passed away," I reminded him. He still looked baffled.

"Excuse me, your excellency," said the footman. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with the major-domo. I believe your excellency is Scottish."

"Impossible!" gasped the doorman.

I fixed him with the stare I used as a prefect when some gobby second year tried talking back. "Do you have some objection?"

"By no means, your excellency," he faltered. "But your excellency speaks our language so perfectly that I can't believe your excellency is not Russian."

I smiled. "Yes, I'm from Scotland, where I had the finest education in the world." I turned to the footman. "How about you? Any problem with my being Scottish?"

"What I meant, your excellency," he gabbled, "is that perhaps you are not conversant with our circumstances. We are serfs. Whoever inherits Madame's estate will inherit us as well."

"Then I hope she's left you to someone nice."

"It is widely known that Madame has never made a will. We will therefore be given to Our Little Father, the Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, of Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, Tsar of Kazan, Tsar of Astrakhan, Tsar of Poland, Tsar of Siberia, Tsar of Tauric Chersonesos, Tsar of Georgia, Lord of Pskov, Grand Duke of Smolensk, Lithuania, Volhynia—"

"Yes," I said, "I know who you mean. So how do you feel about that?"

The footman and doorman closed their eyes in collective ecstasy.

"It is the greatest honour imaginable for a serf," breathed the footman, "to be allowed to serve Our Little Father, the Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, of Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, Tsar of Kazan, Tsar of Astrakhan, Tsar of Poland—"

I slipped past them through the door as they contemplated their good fortune. It was nice to hear that my language skills had passed muster.

I hadn't appreciated the significance of the parcel of books when it arrived in the library, marked for my personal attention. The accompanying unsigned note said: "Read and inwardly digest," so whenever I had a slack moment, I did. I got through the books on Russian history, geography, architecture, politics, culture and infrastructure in no time, and then moved on to the complete works of Tolstoy in the original. I found they weren't entirely in Russian. A good chunk of the dialogue was in French, spoken by pretentious aristocrats. My French is so fluent that I scarcely consider it a foreign language, but it was fun getting back in touch with my inner Slavonicist.

I was in my flat in Morningside, deciding that it really was time I repainted the kitchen, when the twinges began. At first, it seemed like a touch of indigestion. Then I thought I might be coming down with flu. Then I was convinced that my appendix had burst. I doubled over, gasping, my eyes screwed up as I tried to ride the pain. And when I opened them again, I was lying on a polished wooden floor, looking at a bulbous metal object with a tap sticking out of it. It says a lot for my state of confusion that it was a full minute before I recognised it as a Russian samovar.

I had been told that I would experience "slight discomfort" when time travelling, and I was pretty shocked that I hadn't been told the truth: it was excruciating. Surely I hadn't come over as a wimp who would refuse a mission just because it involved severe abdominal pain?

It was starting to ease off slightly, and I began to assess my surroundings, drawing on my recent reading. I was in an ante-room of a nineteenth-century Russian mansion. The samovar was brass, embossed, stately yet serviceable, and would provide a lovely cup of tea. It stood beside a high-legged settee whose upholstery was old and faded. A large rectangular mirror hung on the wall, its gilt frame dingy, its glass mottled with age. There was the faint sound of dance music next door, the high-pitched chatter of society ladies, the clink of wine glasses.

The sound suddenly got louder—the door was opening. I didn't want to be seen before I knew more about where I was,

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so I dived under the settee. It might be four decades since I left school, but I have to say I still had the speed and proficiency that saw me crowned class swimming champion.

My view was restricted to floor level. A man had come in. A young man, from the stride. Squeaky shoes. New shoes. Buffed black leather, intricate silver buckles. They paused, as though the newcomer, like me, was assessing his surroundings.

As I peered out from under the sofa, I could see his distorted reflection in the curve of the samovar. He was just a vague shape, but I suddenly had the most extraordinary optical illusion. I thought I saw his head spinning round and round.

I can tell you I was more than a little alarmed. The twinges had been bad enough, but nobody had mentioned visual disturbance. I blinked a few times, then opened my eyes wide and everything was back to normal.

A voice came from the doorway, female, middle-aged, imperious. "My dear Sasha! For shame! What are you doing hiding in here with all the ladies desperate for your company?"

"Countess, you know you are the only lady whose company I seek. Forgive me—I felt quite overwhelmed by the grandeur of this evening, and came in here to compose myself."

The young man's voice was light and attractive, the sort that you could listen to for hours on the radio. I wondered whether he had a face for radio as well.

High heels tapped across the floor towards me. The settee sagged, pinning me to the polished parquetry. I couldn't help admiring the quality of the floor, each wooden mosaic piece meticulously interlocked with its neighbours into graceful patterns. Thankfully, this was a well-kept house, with no sneeze-inducing dustballs. In front of my nose, chubby ankles bulged over high-heeled satin shoes.

"Dear child! You think this is an evening of grandeur? Why, we are all laughing at Lidia Ivanovna for its embarrassing simplicity—the poor creature hasn't the first idea of how to entertain. Secure me an invitation to Madame Potapova's, and then you shall see a proper party."

The settee sagged again as the buckled shoes settled alongside the high heels, but I was less squashed this time.

“If you’re certain...” the young man murmured. “Perhaps I’m not ready.”

“You are ready, Sasha, and you will not fail me.” The tone was threatening rather than encouraging, and then it softened. “I assure you that even now they are discussing who your family might be, and creating the most glittering biographies for you. ‘I hear he is the first cousin of the old prince...’ ‘He is obviously related to the blue-eyed baroness; the family resemblance is unmistakable...’”

There was a pause.

“I shall not fail you,” said the young man.

The countess let out a deep sigh of contentment and the settee sagged still further. “To think that tomorrow evening I shall be a guest at Madame Potapova’s! Yes, that will be success indeed. Now, enough of this hiding away—you are here to be seen. Escort me to the ballroom.”

“I am yours to command.” The buckled shoes turned 180 degrees to face the high heels and braced themselves. The high heels moved a fraction of a millimetre, and I deduced that the young man was attempting to haul the countess to her fat little feet. Eventually he succeeded and both pairs of shoes proceeded to the ballroom.

Once the door had closed behind them, I wriggled out from under the settee and tried to make sense of what I’d heard. It was like a reverse *My Fair Lady*. Without the songs.

I dusted myself down, and discovered I was wearing a floor-length lilac evening gown, with long white kid gloves that stretched up over my elbows. Just one other thing to check. I lifted the hem of my gown. Excellent. I was still wearing my trusty Doc Martens. The countess might think she had the edge on me in terms of fashion with her high heels, but she was storing up all sorts of problems for herself in terms of bunions, plantar fasciitis and sciatica.

I pushed open the door and emerged into a ballroom of exquisite proportions. It was easy to recognise the refined style of

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the great Russian architect Andrei Voronikhin. But despite the room being perfect for purpose, and the music enticing, nobody was dancing. Guests were sitting around in morose little groups. Not even phalanxes of footmen bearing vast quantities of food and drink seemed to cheer them up.

It was time to test out my new skill. My heart was racing, whether from excitement or nerves I wasn't sure.

I thought back to the instructions I had been given: "You must learn to be unobtrusive."

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"What is our greatest attribute? Our mind. You must concentrate and practise."

So I concentrated and practised until the day came that I cracked it, and people started bumping into me in the Morningside Waitrose. Nobody would ever be rude enough to bump into you deliberately in the Morningside Waitrose, so I knew people just didn't see me.

I moved further into the ballroom, blending discreetly into the background as I crossed the magnificent parquet floor. It was made of intertwined leaf shapes in different colours, giving the impression of an autumn woodland. I crept up behind a semi-circle of young women who had turned world-weariness into an art form. They managed to wilt while simultaneously sitting bolt upright. I filed the technique away for future use.

"Who could have imagined it would be so dreadfully dreary?" said one, fanning herself.

"Who could have imagined anything else?" said another. "Lidia Ivanovna simply has no idea what a party is."

"No, I imagine this is the most exciting night of her life. Oh, ladies, that dress!"

They all sniggered.

"That alone was worth coming for," said the first. "Do you think it belonged to her mother?"

"Her mother? You mean her grandmother."

"Well, now we have seen the antique dress, we can be sure there will be nothing of further interest. The champagne is



surprisingly tolerable, though. I shall have another glass. And then I shall prise my husband away from the card table and get him to take me to dinner somewhere expensive.”

“Let’s all have some more champagne, then we’ll come with you and the evening won’t have been completely wasted.”

I drifted past them towards the next group, feeling quite sympathetic towards this Lidia Ivanovna. As far as I could see, the problem wasn’t the party, it was the guests.

My fingers and toes started tingling. It wasn’t unpleasant, nothing like the time-travelling twinges, just noticeable enough to get my attention. This must be the signal that I was nearing my target, like an internal metal detector indicating a hoard of Viking treasure. It took me a while to establish which direction to go in, but eventually the increase in tingling led me to a slim young woman standing alone in a corner. She was absolutely stunning, with the perfect contours of a classical statue. Her skin was flawless. Unlike the young wives, she wasn’t plastered in make-up, and her long, fair hair hung loose rather than crimped into elaborate swirls. She looked in her mid-twenties, and the simple style of her dress showed she was still unmarried.

She was also a bag of nerves, her arms clasped protectively over her chest, her face tight with apprehension.

I walked up to her, my hand outstretched. “Good evening,” I said. “Allow me to introduce myself. Shona Fergusovna.”

She jumped at being addressed, then smiled tentatively as she took my hand.

“How kind of you to come,” she said. “Forgive me for not recognising you. This is the first time I have been out in society, and I’m afraid all of my guests are unknown to me.”

So the person I had been sent to help in nineteenth-century Russia was our hostess, Lidia Ivanovna.

“Lovely party,” I said.

“Thank you—this is the first party I’ve ever hosted—indeed, the first party I’ve ever attended. I had nobody to ask for advice. I’m not sure...” Her voice tailed off as she looked round at the yawning, gossiping guests, and her face tightened with anxiety.

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"You know what?" I said. "Nothing gets a party going like a wee jig. Leave it to me."

I crossed over to the orchestra. It was the standard nineteenth-century set of violin, double bass, bassoon, clarinet, trumpet, percussion and accordion, and it couldn't have been a better mix for my purposes.

"Hello, lads," I said, briskly idiomatic, and explained what we were going to do. Then I clapped my hands to get everyone's attention.

"Honoured guests!" I called loudly in French, determined to make an impression for Lidia's sake.

Everyone turned towards me.

"Lidia Ivanovna, your gracious hostess, has spared no expense to make this a memorable evening for you. She's brought me all the way from Edinburgh to teach you some Scottish country dancing. As I'm sure you know, Scottish country dancing is now all the rage at the most fashionable soirées."

There was an uncertain pause and then everyone nodded vigorously, pretending they had known this all along.

"In me, Lidia Ivanovna gives you the *crème de la crème*," I went on. "I am Shona Fergusovna McMonagle, former captain of the gold medal-winning team from the Marcia Blaine School for Girls. We were specially commended at the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society's spring fling for footwork, flexibility and fervour."

There was an excited murmuring.

"We'll start with a Dashing White Sergeant," I told them. "Kindly get into sets of six, two lines facing one another, boy-girl-boy and girl-boy-girl."

When I choose to, I have the voice of authority. It comes from having been class prefect. Obediently, the guests rose and took their places in the ballroom. I struck up on the accordion I had borrowed from the band. The school gave me a good training in classical music—the recording of me playing Sibelius's violin concerto at the annual prize-giving still raises considerable sums for the fund-raising appeal—but I like to think I'm equally adept at traditional music, particularly on the mouth organ.

As I played, the other musicians gamely following my lead, I called out clear, simple instructions for dancing the reel. “Forward, back, forward! Grab an arm! Twizzle! Hoppity-hop!”

But despite the precision of my directions, it was a catastrophe. The dancers careered into one another, crashing into tables and chairs, smashing glasses, knocking over footmen. Then came an ominous commotion at the far end of the ballroom, and a shriek of “Saints in heaven! Save him!”

Something had gone terribly wrong. I realised there could easily be a panic. If the guests stampeded, there would be horrific injuries. Clearly the only responsible thing to do was to keep playing, Titanic-style, in order to distract everyone. I gestured to the other musicians to play louder while I called the steps with even more authority. The dancers responded to my cool leadership, grabbing, twizzling and hopping.

Peering across the room to the cause of the drama, I saw that a tiny elderly gentleman had become lodged in a portly lady’s cleavage and was suffocating. Two immaculately dressed officers rushed up to him, grabbed him by the shoulders and legs and eventually managed to wrench him free. Wheezing, he was helped to a seat where he slowly regained his colour, while the portly lady set about patting everything back into place. And as she made her way to another seat, I caught sight of fat little feet in satin shoes.

So this was the redoubtable countess. I had no doubt where the blame lay: the tiny gentleman would have been completely incapable of steering such a bulky vessel.

Now that the crisis was over, I stopped the band, and the dancers juddered to a halt.

“You see what happens when you don’t pay attention?” I said. “Somebody—” (I looked meaningfully in the direction of the countess) “—obviously went forward when they should have gone back. Or possibly vice versa. There could have been a fatality had it not been for the intervention of the military, and that wouldn’t have been a very nice end to the evening, would it?”

There was an embarrassed muttering and shuffling of feet.

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"You have a choice," I went on. "You can all sit down and listen to the music. But if you want to dance, you're going to have to obey my instructions to the letter. Do I make myself abundantly clear?"

"Please, Shona Fergusovna, please let us keep dancing!" burst out a guest.

"Please, Shona Fergusovna!" cried another. "This is so much fun! We promise to do exactly as you say."

Their faces were so eager that I couldn't help relenting.

"All right. I'll give you one more chance. Strip the Willow. Sets of four couples, boys facing girls."

The dancers went in more or less the right directions, clearly making an effort to behave. So I seamlessly led the band into Hamilton House followed by a strathspey. The atmosphere in the ballroom was transformed from its earlier apathy. The dancers smiled and laughed as they hurtled round the room, and there was an enthusiastic hubbub among the observers sitting at the side, who nodded and clapped along in time to the music.

After a particularly vigorous eightsome reel, I announced a refreshment break and gave credit where credit was due.

"Very well done," I said. "I wish the RSCDS could see you. You'd all be up for dancing achievement awards, elementary level."

Everybody beamed. I could see people beginning to move towards me, no doubt to compliment me on my language and performance skills. But after a round of hand-shaking with the band, I slipped past the guests, fading into the background.

"Just a tea for me," I told a passing footman as I escaped back into the anteroom and sank into the large indentation on the settee.

The footman retrieved the pot from the top of the samovar and poured strong black tea into a glass in a silver filigree holder, adding hot water from the samovar's tap. I prefer my tea with milk, but I knew better than to show myself up as an ignorant foreigner. I was determined to make a success of my mission, which meant I had to fit in.

I retrieved a cube of sugar from the little dish the footman had left beside me and, holding it between my teeth in the tradi-

tional way, took a sip of tea. I was able to identify it as Russian Caravan, its smoky flavour evoking the camp fires during its long journey across the steppes. I still didn't know exactly what my mission was, but I was more than happy to do whatever was necessary to help our shy, uncertain, stunningly beautiful hostess.

She was an enigma. Why weren't her parents hosting the party? Why was this the first party she had ever been to? Why wasn't she married yet? I sucked the pungent tea through the sugar lump and told myself to be patient. I had only just arrived.

When I returned to the ballroom, Lidia Ivanovna ran up to me and clasped my hand.

"Shona Fergusovna, I will never be able to thank you enough! I was so afraid this evening would be a disaster but you have saved it for me!"

"Not a problem," I said. "Delighted to help." Not only delighted but also destined and duty-bound. "That was a lovely cup of tea, so now I'm good to go."

Lidia tried to smile, but her eyes were clouded. Something seemed to have upset her.

"Of course, it is time for you to leave," she said. "You must have many more important social engagements than this. How kind of you to have come at all."

It was easy to Russify what I would say in English, but I had to remember that this wasn't the twenty-first century.

"No, 'good to go' is just an expression," I explained. "I mean I'm going to get them dancing again."

The orchestra members, anxious to learn more tunes, greeted me warmly.

"Honoured guests!" I called. "You've done so well that I think you're ready to try one of our more complicated dances, the Gay Gordons. This is for couples, so grab the person you most want to dance with."

The guests all raced to partner up. Lidia Ivanovna, entirely unaware of how beautiful she looked, stood hesitantly at the edge of the dance floor as couples rushed past her.

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From the opposite side of the room came a young man. He was absolutely stunning, the most gorgeous man I had ever seen. Blond hair flopping sexily over his forehead. Chiselled cheekbones. Temptingly sensuous lips. And he was wearing new shoes, buffed black with intricate silver buckles. He certainly didn't have a face for radio: he would have been welcome on any television sofa in the world.

It was clear that he had eyes for nobody but Lidia, and was walking straight towards her, as though the other guests were nothing more than troublesome flies. As I watched, it was like one of those films where everything goes blurred and out of focus except the main characters. All I could see was this one couple, two unbelievably beautiful people preparing to dance with one another. It would be the highlight of the evening. I was already imagining calling the instructions for the Gay Gordons: *Forwards, forwards backwards, backwards forwards, backwards backwards. Gents skip! Ladies rotate!* while the perfect couple danced in perfect harmony.

But before I even had time to pick up the accordion, I saw the hefty lady with the dangerous cleavage totter towards Sasha and intercept him. And just as the countess hauled Sasha into line, Lidia was similarly captured by the tiny elderly gentleman who had nearly expired in the countess's bosom.

This was all wrong. They had to have a chance to ditch their partners. I got through the Gay Gordons as quickly as possible and, just as Lidia and the tiny gentleman came to a standstill beside me, I quickly announced a ladies' excuse-me.

"Excuse me," said Lidia to the tiny gentleman. "I enjoyed our dance very much, but I must take care of my other guests."

She moved to the side of the room where some elderly ladies were sitting, and signalled to a footman to bring them more champagne. Meanwhile, Sasha had been grabbed from the countess by an eager widow, who was then seen off in her turn by a stocky termagant. He looked longingly towards Lidia every time he was spun past her, but she was deep in conversation with the old dears, as far as their ear trumpets allowed.

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In vain, I taught the guests Strip the Willow, Wind on Loch Fyne and The Bees of Maggielknockater. Lidia didn't come near the dance floor again, her attention solely on the guests who were too old or infirm to whirl round the ballroom. Sasha had been commandeered once again by the countess, who, when she wasn't dancing with him, insisted that he fetch more champagne, arrange her shawl round her shoulders, find her a footstool, fetch more champagne, take her shawl off her shoulders, and fetch more champagne. He did all this without the slightest complaint.

It was as though everything was conspiring to keep the two beautiful young people apart. Finally, the party started to break up and the guests headed for the cloakroom to retrieve their cloaks.

I turned to the orchestra. "Great gig, guys," I said. "With a bit more practice, you could almost sound like a Scottish country dance band. That would be a nice wee earner for you."

The leader of the orchestra bowed. "A generous suggestion, your excellency, but this was our final performance. We are all about to enlist in the army."

I was quite surprised—nothing I had read suggested that the Imperial Russian Army had a band. But I could see that it might work very well. "If you got the cannons synchronised, you could do a brilliant version of the *1812 Overture*," I said.

"The what?" asked the leader.

It was an awkward moment. I realised I had no idea what year it was. And it would be totally unprofessional just to ask—what sort of numpty doesn't know the date? I couldn't appear unprofessional on my very first mission. So I decided to solve it myself. I would easily be able to work it out from clues. After all, when I'm doing a jigsaw, I always keep the edge pieces aside until the end. And here was my very first clue: Tchaikovsky wrote the *1812 Overture* in 1880, so it must be earlier than that.

"Well," I said heartily, "have a lovely time in the military band. I'm sure there will be lots of rousing martial music for you to play."

The leader shook his head. "We will never play again, your excellency. To be allowed to accompany you this evening has

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been the pinnacle of our musical careers. We can be musicians no longer, for, without you, our music will have no meaning. During the interval, we decided that our only option was to enlist, because it guarantees us certain death.”

The others all nodded enthusiastically. “Mikhail, whose accordion you played, is already making arrangements to have it buried with him,” said the percussionist.

“Really?” I said. “Mikhail, are you married?”

“Of course, your excellency,” said Mikhail. “We all are. With many children.”

“Then isn't it a bit excessive having your accordion buried with you? How about letting your widow and dependents sell it to raise some cash?”

Mikhail lifted the instrument high over his head. “Now that you have played it, your excellency, I will allow nobody to profane it by playing it again,” he said. “Rather, I will hurl it to the ground and dance the kazachok on it.”

“Oh, please don't do that,” I said, worried in case he scratched the fabulous parquet floor. I could see their minds were made up, so all I could do was thank them again for their help, and express the hope that their certain deaths would be swift and painless.

They appreciated the sentiment, bowed to me, and departed.

The ballroom was practically empty, so it was time for me to go as well. I had no idea where I was going, but I had been told that accommodation would be provided.

Lidia Ivanovna was at the grand entrance, bidding farewell to her guests as they prepared to leave in their drozhkies.

“Dear Shona Fergusovna!” she cried when she saw me. “I shall never be able to repay your kindness—I thank you with all my heart.”

“Absolutely no thanks necessary. It was a great pleasure,” I assured her. “Well done for throwing such a great party and I look forward to seeing you again soon.”

As I got to the foot of the steps, an elegant four-wheeled drozhky drew up and the coachman dismounted to help me into



the carriage. He was shaggy-haired and heavily bearded, and wore a long shabby coat.

“Home, your excellency?” he asked.

“Home,” I agreed, feeling quite excited about finding out where home would be. The coachman set the horse off at a brisk trot and after a few minutes, we overtook a carriage containing the tubby countess and a cadaverous gentleman who gave me a haughty stare.

“Who’s that in the carriage with the countess?” I asked the coachman.

“The count,” he said and then elaborated, “her husband.”

Perhaps coachmen, like taxi drivers, knew everything. “The countess spent a lot of time with a young man, blond, early twenties, slim, unbelievably good-looking,” I said. “What’s his relationship to her?”

The coachman’s reply was blighted by a bout of coughing.

“Did you say protégé?” I asked.

“If your excellency will forgive me.”

“Of course—you can’t help a cough. So what do you know about him?”

“I have no personal knowledge of the young man,” said the coachman. “His name is Sasha and he is new in town. I hear he is the first cousin of the old prince. And he is believed to bear a close family resemblance to the blue-eyed baroness.”

“That’s very interesting,” I said.

And I meant it. First, it confirmed that coachmen know everything. And second, it revealed that the gorgeous young man was being passed off under a false identity. Other people might be hoodwinked, but I was on a mission, and nobody was going to hoodwink me.



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