

Tree of Angels

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One

Russia, 1910

The kitchen smelled of rosemary and lime.

Every evening the pine table was scrubbed lightly with salt, which was left overnight and then wiped away with a damp cloth in the morning. Nina sat under the table. She was eleven years old and frightened of the pictures on the cards: the woman with the mad dog, the hanged man. She was wearing new shoes and next to them could see a hairpin and a cherrystone, stuck in a crack between the cedar floorboards. She could also see the new leather slippers her sister Katya was wearing, and Darya Fyodorovna's best boots. Darya was the housekeeper and her boots, which were not new but old, reeked of charcoal and beeswax.

All morning the kitchen had been nothing but bustle in preparation for Katya's betrothal party, for from today she would be formally betrothed and in the spring of next year there would be a wedding. The household had been up since dawn but there was a lull now and Katya had prevailed upon Darya to do a reading of the cards. There had been whispers and laughter but then Katya's voice was loud overhead, 'What about Nina? I'm to marry and have children and will go on a long journey across the sea to the other side of the world. But what about her?'

'A journey, yes, but not as long as yours. No, I see a long life for your sister, with more than one husband,' here the housekeeper spat into the fire, 'and many houses.' The spit hissed like it was alive.

Next to the table there was a cupboard and under the cupboard Nina could see a tray where Cook hid the knives in case robbers or Jews broke into the house at night. If she could reach the tray, she told herself, she would take hold of the

biggest knife there, the one with the red handle and a blade wide as a sword, and plunge it into Darya Fyodorovna's heart. Not because it was Katya who was to go on a long journey, nor because of what the cards had predicted about husbands – at eleven years of age the number of husbands is neither here nor there – but because of the last bit about houses. For Nina had always lived on her family's estate and knew she would never want to live anywhere else.

'And children?' Katya continued. 'How many children will Nina . . .'

But at that moment Nina scrambled out from beneath the table. 'I don't believe it about the houses,' she glared, 'and am going to tell Mamma!' Because although the cards and ouija boards and table rapping were all the rage in the fashionable circles of Moscow and Petersburg – even, it was rumoured, in the royal court itself – Mamma did not approve. However, at that moment the men came to the door to begin carrying the chairs out on to the lawn, after which they would come back for the betrothal cake.

There was a clapping game: 'The bride in the carriage, the bride on the stairs, the bride in the church with a crown in her hair!' Looking at the cake on the walnut sideboard, Nina couldn't help but hum this to herself. The cake had taken two days to make and more than a dozen eggs had gone into it, the yolks mixed separately from the whites, which were beaten until they turned to sugar snow. And then the fruit was stirred in, raisins, plums, candied peel, all soaked in brandy. Now that it was finished however, the strongest smell was of marzipan. For the cake wasn't all cake, it was only cake in the middle covered by marzipan an inch deep and decorated with a pattern of almonds and sugared cherries. The final touch was the pink ribbon around the base, ordered from the spring Maples catalogue and sent all the way from London. The ribbon had come in the same parcel as the dyed chiffon for Mamma and Katya's dresses and the lengths of blue and white cotton for Nina's sailor suit. She would have liked a chiffon dress too but Mamma said she'd have to wait until she was seventeen, as old as Katya. Which meant there were six years to go.

Near where the ribbon was tied into a bow were two sugared

cherries that looked like eyes, with a pair of almond eyes nearby. The cherry eyes were those of the man Katya was to marry, Dmitri Borisovich, who in life also had a cherry nose, while the almond eyes were Katya's. The Dimitri eyes looked straight ahead into the room but the Katya eyes were looking sideways, through the dining room wall and past the fruit trees in the orchard, all the way to the end of the valley. It was a way of looking she'd had since the morning Papa informed the household that his eldest daughter was to be betrothed. Darya and Cook had immediately begun measuring out crystallised fruit, steeping raisins. The smell of hot brandy had sent Nina to sleep and she remembered waking to the clunk of the metal weights on the scales and Darya talking in a low voice.

'So don't think you can avoid a loaf in your oven that way, Ekaterina, because that's how the peasant women do it.' Her laugh was harsh. 'That is why Father Sergii makes them stand at the back of the church. So now you know. Pigs! They can't even keep in their shit.'

Katya had stood up, very slowly, and slapped the older woman across the face. Then she started looking beyond people, beyond, Nina sometimes thought, Russia itself.

The brightly coloured flowers growing in pots along the veranda were wilting already, it was so hot, and the head gardener's wife was watering them from barrels, the grass glistening diamonds in her wake. To Nina's left the lawn at the front of the house sloped down past the vegetable gardens and the conservatory, behind which was the orchard, planted with apple, pear and cherry trees. At the top end of the orchard, at the back of the house, was High Field, and at the bottom of the orchard, where the lawn also ended, was Low Field, which eventually fell away steeply to a stream. On the other side of the stream, beyond the willows and the beehives, the fields proper began.

'Get on, you!' the gardener shouted amiably at the boys raking the gravel drive. Later in the morning the carriages would begin to arrive, having turned right at the crossroads off the road which led to the town three miles away. The estate's house had been designed by Papa's grandfather, a brilliant but eccentric man who had it built all on one level because his mother had

fallen down a flight of stairs as a child and afterwards walked with a limp. During his lifetime the occupants of any carriage approaching the crossroads could tell if the master wasn't in a mood to welcome guests because there would be no flag flying from the flagpole at the end of the front veranda. The flagpole had been taken down long ago but along the back veranda there was still a mural which had been painted by one of the farm's serfs, a talented artist. The mural was very faded now, invisible in places but still beautiful: an exotic garden with a palm tree – just like the one in the conservatory, although no one knew which had come first, the painting or the real tree – and strange birds and flowers.

At the far side of the front lawn, at the end of the drive, tables had been set under the lilac trees. The larger tables were already covered with lace cloths while, across a smaller one, Cook was tenderly stroking a plain white cloth into place, the woman beside her holding aloft the muslin shawl that would keep away the wasps. Nina had to flatten herself against the shutters as two of the men lurched the cake out of the front door, down the veranda steps and across the damp grass. 'Ai!' Cook shrieked, skirt and apron flapping as they stumbled. But the cake was safe, was being lowered on to the table, and Cook's attention was already elsewhere as she scolded a red-faced girl that if any of the Dresden plates were broken someone would be sent home with a sore head. Above the cake, the shawl was tossed into a blue sky and descended like a veil.

There were seven tables altogether. One for the cake, two for the children, their governesses and *nyanyas*, and four tables pushed together for the rest of the guests. Nina was old enough to sit with the adults although not old enough for wine, even though Papa had let her sip champagne at the breaking of St Pyotr's Fast. He'd lifted her against his broad chest and held the glass to her mouth and both he and Mamma had laughed. Nina had laughed too, the bubbles in her nose. But when she asked if she might have a little wine today Mamma had shaken her head, and when she pulled at Mamma's pearl ring and reminded her about the champagne, Mamma simply smiled and said that was different.

Before breakfast this morning the men had brought buckets of

ice from the ice cave. There were two buckets at the end of each table and, on the ice, lettuce leaves held sturgeon eggs, freshwater crayfish and smoked salmon. There were, of course, special knives and forks for the fish, but at the far end of the table the elderly Countess Grekova was now steadily eating her salmon with a soup spoon. Mamma was particularly fond of the Countess who, she said, had been very generous as a young woman and was known for the *salons* she used to hold for writers and artists. Watching the Countess today, Nina couldn't help wondering whether someone shouldn't scold her for the spoon, and for her yellow teeth. But then she heard Aunt Elena confide to her neighbour that the old lady had stopped caring what the world thought a long time ago, so scolding would probably do no good.

At the other end of the table the conversation had turned to the Dowager Empress, who'd travelled to England for the funeral of Edward VII, standing beside her sister at the coffin. It was said she would spend the summer in England. It was also said that the new king, George V, was so like the Emperor in appearance that they looked more like brothers than cousins. And then the funeral and the royal cousins were forgotten as Darya clapped her hands and the girls ran to replace the fish plates with platters of crumbed veal and mushrooms, lamb cutlets covered in raisin sauce, roast goose with apple, and duck glazed with orange and lime.

Nina was greedy though never fat – Mamma would not have allowed that – and her mouth watered at the lamb cutlets although she finally chose goose because of the skin. With the goose she had roast potatoes, baby carrots dribbled with honey, and red cabbage fried with flakes of almonds. In the centre of the table stood the *tvorog* cheese in the shape of a pyramid, and next to it fragrant pancakes rose from a bed of mint. Nina didn't like the bitter cheese, but she did like pancakes, indeed she liked pancakes even more than goose, so after eating most of the food on her plate she slipped the remains under the table to where Cuckoo, the Countess's bad-tempered dachshund, was waiting.

'Why, yes,' Mamma nodded across the table at Father Sergii, who had mushroom in his beard, 'yes, I expect our next crop of apples to be superb. And you shall have some of them.'

Nina forgave the old man the mushroom for he was in love with Mamma. 'Your mother,' Papa would announce, 'could have married a Grand Duke.' At night, when Nina was getting ready for bed, Darya would tell her folktales – about the witch, Baba Yaga, whose hut could run through the forest on legs, or a wise girl who answered an emperor's riddle. But sometimes instead of these stories she would describe the dresses Mamma used to wear to the Mariinsky Theatre, and how she'd been known throughout Petersburg for the pearls she wore in her waist-length, blue-black hair. By the time she was seventeen years old she had already received two excellent offers of marriage. 'But your mother', Darya lowered her voice, frowning slightly, 'was an only child, her parents' pride and joy, and they agreed she should marry for love.' Andrei Karsavin had recently graduated from the School of Jurisprudence and a month after they met Mamma agreed to marry him and live on his estate.

A wasp circled sleepily in the steam of the samovar and Nina watched it. Suddenly Papa thumped the table, making everyone jump. 'What you don't understand about modern farming,' he thumped again, 'and what you *must* understand is this . . .'

Before he could go on, their neighbour, Sergei Rudolfoveich, turned to Mamma. 'I believe our Andrei's agrarian passions to be of a religious tenor,' he wagged his finger playfully, 'and if you are not careful, Irina, he will leave you one day to become a *skhimnik*.'

'Andryusha,' she exclaimed in mock horror, 'a hermit?' causing all who heard her, including Papa, to laugh.

Father Sergii coughed at that moment and Nina wondered what he would make of this joke, but his eyes, which were surprisingly clear and as blue as the sky overhead, showed he hadn't been listening. 'And pears?' his voice faintly querulous.

'Pears, Father?' Mamma stopped laughing and tenderly touched the back of his hand.

'My wife's pears. They have also been a disappointment.'

The bride in her carriage, the bride on the stairs. 'To the bride.' The man in uniform seated next to Katya raised his glass but Katya replied quietly, 'I am not a bride today, Ivan Vasilyevich, and will not be one for a year yet.'

The crowns held over the heads of a bride and bridegroom were to remind them that even though they might anticipate riches on earth they must not forget Christ's suffering on the cross. Darya had explained this in the kitchen this morning and when Nina asked why a bride's dress must be white, when pink or lemon was prettier, Darya had said this was because white is the colour for a princess and on the day of their wedding every woman is a princess and every man a prince.

Nina couldn't imagine Dmitri Borisovich looking like a prince but Ivan Vasilyevich looked like one from a picture book, with his neat moustache and his medals. The gardener had burst into the kitchen one morning last week to say that Ivan was back on his parents' estate after three years and it was rumoured he was leaving the army. Today Nina longed to see the curved sword everyone knew the young officer had won from a Turkish general, but he didn't seem to have brought it with him and she couldn't ask him about it because his attention was fixed solely on Katya. Ivan Vasilyevich hadn't seen Katya for a very long time and, when he had arrived, he'd taken her by both hands and declared she'd changed so much he could barely believe she could be little Ekaterina Andreyevna at all. Dmitri Borisovich had slapped him on the shoulder, laughing that Ivan was right, and that Katya had grown up to be the most beautiful woman in the region.

'Strawberries,' it was the Countess, 'strawberries are good but raspberries are better.' The old lady, still wielding the soup-spoon, had dribbled raspberry spit on her blouse, making Nina wonder whether she ever really had had a *salon* and why it was that old people didn't have *nyanyas* to keep them clean. There were also pastries for dessert, but Nina preferred raspberries too and filled a bowl full of them, with ice cream, cream and sugar. She also took a chocolate wafer but when she bit into it the centre oozed peppermint, and she had to spit it into a corner of her napkin before slipping the rest of the wafer down the side of the chair – where Cuckoo nipped her sharply on the thumb.

'Ah!' she cried, then, 'No!' because her gold charm bracelet with the basket of flowers and the cat and the harp had slipped from her wrist. 'No, Cuckoo!' The stupid animal might eat it, might even choke and die there under the table and how would

they get it back then? 'Please!' But no one was listening. The servants were busy collecting trays from the veranda and she wasn't supposed to feed Cuckoo anyway.

'Please!' She stood up and reached across the table to where Dmitri Borisovich, beaded with sweat, was drinking vodka and swaying his head in time with the gramophone. 'My bracelet . . . Cuckoo!' At first he blinked like a puzzled bear, but then nodded, reached for a fistful of chocolate biscuits and disappeared under the table. A moment later the tablecloth rose next to Nina's chair and Cuckoo raced out, chasing the biscuits.

'That', Dmitri whispered solemnly, 'will keep Cuckoo occupied.'

'And the bracelet?' Nina asked, joining him on the damp grass. He shook his head. 'Where exactly did you drop it?'

In the greenish light under the table his face was a large cheese and Nina couldn't help but giggle.

'Where?' he whispered again. However, something hard was digging into her right knee.

'Here,' careful not to bump her head or brush against Aunt Elena's crocodile shoes. 'Here,' she hissed triumphantly, 'I've found it.'

But instead of looking at the bracelet Dmitri Borisovich stared past her. Cricking her neck round Nina was surprised to see a hand, emerging from the sleeve of a uniform, moving blindly under the tablecloth. Then another, smaller, hand came down to guide it and between them the two hands pulled Katya's lemon skirt up over Katya's white-stockinged knees.

Nina was curious about what might happen next but her companion was no longer watching, his forehead on the ground. 'Please tell me, Nina Andreyevna,' he whispered hoarsely, 'please tell me that I am shamefully drunk.'

As she looked at the grown man wedged under the table, Nina understood he must be. 'Yes, Dmitri Borisovich,' she agreed. 'I'm afraid you are very drunk indeed.'

Papa and the older men had retired to the study for cognac and cigars, while the younger men were carrying hunting rifles and bottles of plum brandy to Low Field.

'Why do they need rifles?' Nina pulled at Darya's sleeve. 'Is it

in case of wolves?' Dmitri Borisovich was surely in no condition to face anything so dangerous.

'Wolves? No, by St Nikolai, the young gentlemen haven't gone to shoot at anything that I know of, more fools they.' Darya snorted and slapped her skirts. 'The coffee. Where are those wretched girls with the coffee?'

After going to the privy at the end of the veranda, Nina went into the drawing room, where the table was covered with plates of pistachios, *langues de chat*, dock leaves with aniseed and sugared hazel nuts. Only the Countess seemed to be eating, however, the rest of the ladies either fanning themselves or pinning their hair. Nina slipped a pistachio into her mouth, along with a hazelnut, but then Mamma caught sight of her and beckoned with a glass. 'Ninotchka. Take this to Katya, please, in her room.'

In the hall the marsala flooded hot across her tongue and up into her nose until she coughed nut and sugar. Katya didn't answer when she scratched on her door, so she went to her room to read for a while. She hadn't liked *Great Expectations* at first but she was enjoying it very much now she'd got to Miss Havisham, ghostly in her wedding dress. 'I do hope you'll enjoy this,' Miss Brenchley had said. 'I'll look forward to discussing it with you on my return.' Miss Brenchley was their governess and Mamma had given her permission to go home for two months because her father had died and she hadn't seen England in five years.

Nina read to the end of the chapter and then remembered the wine. This time she pushed Katya's door open; the room was dim and cool, the shutters closed, and Katya was sitting in front of the dressing-table mirror.

'Close the door behind you,' she said. And then, 'Well, this is a sorry mess, isn't it, Nina?'

Nina didn't have to think of an answer, however, because at that moment a shot rang out, then another. 'They're shooting at nothing,' she informed her sister.

'Nothing but the sky.' Katya stood up. 'Come, we must go down there.'

'Katya!'

'Nina, I need you to help me. It's time I told Dmitri I cannot marry him.'

And Nina suddenly understood that Katya had started looking beyond the valley because she'd changed her mind about marrying Dmitri Borisovich. Or maybe she'd never wanted to marry him in the first place.

'But why, Katya?'

Her sister gave a weary smile. 'I don't know, Nina, I don't know.' She sighed, pulling at the ribbon on the front of her dress. 'Do you remember last summer, when we crept out of the house at night and lay on the grass to watch the stars?'

'And the next morning Darya wondered why I had twigs in my hair . . .'

'I thought I understood things last summer. Things like love. But then everything got confused. I can't explain why, Nina, it just did.'

Nina would have liked to ask how it was possible to get confused over something as simple as love, for surely you knew if you loved someone or not? But Katya put her fingers to her lips and led the way along the hall and down the veranda steps. The children were playing skittles in the shade of the lilacs and behind them the cake sat on its table, a fat bride in a veil. Cook and Darya would be angry, Nina thought when she saw it, because of all their work. But no doubt it would get eaten anyway.

Skirting the conservatory they followed the path to the gate, which the young men had carelessly left open. The grass in Low Field was damp and Nina could see that Katya's new slippers and her lemon dress would be ruined, but Katya didn't seem to care, her fine lace shawl dragging behind as Nina hurried to keep up.

'Katya!'

A shot, followed by men shouting, and Katya started to run, calling, 'No! Oh no!' her shawl falling to the ground. By the time Nina had stopped to pick it up, and brush off the grass, the lemon dress was no longer in sight.