

# THE POLAND TRILOGY BY JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

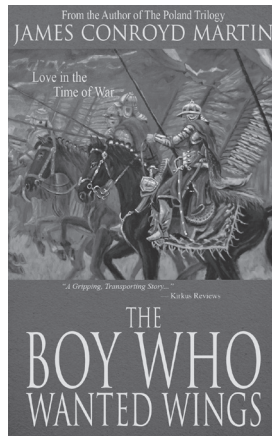


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Based on the diary of a Polish countess who lived through the rise and fall of the Third of May Constitution years, 1791-94, ***Push Not the River*** paints a vivid picture of a tumultuous and unforgettable metamorphosis of a nation—and of Anna, a proud and resilient woman. ***Against a Crimson Sky*** continues Anna's saga as Napoléon comes calling, implying independence would follow if only Polish lancers would accompany him on his fateful 1812 march into Russia. Anna's family fights valiantly to hold on-to a tenuous happiness, their country, and their very lives. Set against the November Rising (1830-31), ***The Warsaw Conspiracy*** depicts partitioned Poland's daring challenge to the Russian Empire. Brilliantly illustrating the psyche of a people determined to reclaim independence in the face of monumental odds, the story features Anna's sons and their fates in love and war.

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# THE WARSAW CONSPIRACY



JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

HUSSAR  
QUILL PRESS



CHICAGO

*The Warsaw Conspiracy*

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While some characters are based on real people as described in the diary that inspired *Push Not the River* and other characters are historical personages, this is a work of fiction.

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*For Mary Rita Perkins Mitchell  
-compatriot on my journey-  
With love and thanks*

# PRONUNCIATION KEY

Czartoryski = Char-ta-RIZ-key

Jan = Yahn

Józef = Yu-zef

Jerzy = Ye-zhĩ

Halicz = Hah-leech

kasza = kasha

Kościuszko = Kawsh-chew-shkaw

Kraków = Krah-kooff

Michał = Mee-how

Paweł = Pah-vel

Sochaczew = Saw-hah-cheff

Stanisław = Stah-neess-wahf

szlachta = shlack-ta



# CONGRESS KINGDOM OF POLAND 1815 — 1831



# PROLOGUE



Birth is Much  
But Breeding is More  
—POLISH PROVERB

## NOVEMBER 1813, WARSAW

ANNA WAS EASING HERSELF OUT of the blue brocaded high-back chair when her water broke. “Sweet Jesus,” she cried in a half-whisper, falling back into the cushions and staring down in disbelief as she watched the pale green of her gown darken.

Her pulse quickened with panic and a flushed heat ran like a river through her veins. Labor would start at any moment. What to do?

Her hands went to her unbraided hair, her fingers frenetically pulling and tugging at the long chestnut brown strands, her mind insensate to the pain. It was a habit that dated to childhood and one that she employed at moments of intense unease or pain, a habit dormant for years, until now.

She fought off fear and willed herself calm. The experience of birth was not new to her—she had already borne three children. But this was the first time she would give birth away from home, away from experienced women, away from a capable midwife.

*How could this be?* She had thought the half-day carriage ride from the Sochaczew estate to Warsaw to be safe, short, and smooth enough for a woman eight months pregnant. Now she became convinced her judgment was flawed. Had it been the bumps and lurches the carriage and she had weathered? There was no counting the holes and ruts left in the unmended roads as tokens of a government usurped by foreigners. Damn the Russians! Or—was she closer to full term than she had supposed? These were moot questions now and she would spare them no time. For the safety of the baby’s delivery, she took a moment to catch her breath and to pray. Early babies meant complications. Early babies often meant...

“Anna! What is it?”

The voice drew her back. Jan stood at the entrance to the reception room of the town house, his handsome face paling as his blue eyes moved from her face to the wet folds of her gown.

Anna swallowed hard. “It’s time, Jan. It’s time.” She managed a smile.

“Oh, my God,” he mumbled.

Anna watched her husband—a Polish lancer who had fought Prussians, Austrians, and Russians, a man who had endured capture by Cossacks, a man who had sustained sword and bullet wounds—stand mute and motionless at the sight of a woman about to birth.

At last he moved slowly toward her. “Oh, Anna,” he breathed, “what are we to do?”

Anna knew her own sense of composure was all important now. She

contrived a little laugh. "Do? It's a safe wager we won't get back to Sochaczew. The path is set, husband."

He sat on the edge of the chair at the bedside and took her hand in his. "You said you had time. You said the journey—"

Anna put a finger to his lips. Her laugh this time was gently mocking. "And you have never been wrong in your life, Jan Stelnicki?"

"Not in such matters," he said.

"To be certain. Such matters are not men's matters." Anna took the measure of her husband's knitted brow beneath the silvering blond hair. "Now, we must both be calm. We will weather this.... Where's Zofia?"

Jan shrugged. "She went out earlier. By the look of your cousin's attire and the scent of her French perfume, she'll not return home any time soon."

"Mary, Help of Christians!" Anna blurted. She took a breath then, fending off the return of her own panic. "You'll have to find someone here in the capital, Jan. Someone who can deliver our child. The servants are scarcely more than children themselves. Zofia herself would have been worthless, but she would have known of someone."

His eyes widened. "Find someone? Who, Anna? Where?"

"That is for you to determine, Major Stelnicki. Surely all the doctors didn't follow Napoleon. And if they did, one or two must have survived the Moscow retreat. Go, now. Soldiers are good at foraging. Their lives depend upon it. You told me so yourself. Now go forage me a midwife at the least." Anna's hand moved to the contour of her belly. "This life depends upon it."

Jan stood. "We should get you to bed first."

"No, the girls here can tend to that much." Anna pulled the rope that would ring the bell in the kitchen. "You must go now. Hurry! Unless you wish to play doctor yourself."

Jan's chiseled face bled to white, a stark contrast to the cobalt eyes and dark blue of his short, tailored coat. He bent to kiss her on the cheek and rushed from the room, nearly colliding in the doorway with the young servant girl, Jolanta.



Anna had been unable to take more than one flight of stairs, and so had been placed in Zofia's bedchamber on the first level. Oblivious to the luxuriousness of the huge bed, its crimson hangings and down-stuffed mattress and pillows, she lay staring at the ceiling. She was alone when the pains took on an increasing regularity, just an hour after Jan had left the town house.

Coming to Warsaw had been a gamble, one she had lost. That much was clear. She had wanted to attend the funeral of Anusia Potocka's mother. Anusia had been a good and dear friend to her in the old days, and despite Jan's cautions, Anna was not to be kept away. Of course, as it turned out he had been right to urge prudence. However, Anna was thankful for the

small blessing that before embarking on his search for a doctor or midwife, Jan had not chided her for her stubbornness. His fears for her and for their child prevailed.

She *had* been foolish to attempt the journey and could only blame herself. There was nothing left to do now but pray. For someone to help. For a safe delivery. For a healthy baby.

And for a girl. She would offer up no more boys to war. She had lost one to the war machine. Dear, sweet Tadeusz, lost on the death march from Moscow. Yes, she would have a girl, a sister for Jan Michał and Barbara. It must be a girl!

The pains were sharper now and becoming more frequent. Where was Jan? Why hadn't he returned?

Jan. Her love for him had not diminished over time despite the fact that the military had taken him away for more years than he had spent with her.

Their marriage had not been what she had imagined, what she had expected. And yet she did not begrudge him his years with Kościuszko or his time with Napoleon. They were years spent for Poland. Always for Poland. On that they had held the same dream, one first given life by Tadeusz Kościuszko, a dream that they would keep an independent Poland. And when it was lost, how they had hoped that with Napoleon they would regain it. While his promise to restore freedom to Poland had been more implicit than explicit, the majority of the country had bought his bill of goods. What was it the little corporal called himself? *A dealer in hope*, that was it. Well, he had been that. He had given them hope and taken so many thousands of young men to their deaths on the steppes of Russia, moving toward Moscow, and then away—in winter.

A pain tore through her like a gutting knife, and she called out to be attended.

This would be her last child. Somehow she knew that. And it would be a girl. No more sacrificial boys, no matter how worthy the cause. The independent Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania had vanished. Might it ever be pieced back together in her lifetime? Not likely.

Looking back even further was no easy thing. By seventeen she had lost her parents and infant brother, all untimely deaths.

But she had her own family now. She had that, no little thing. What was it Aunt Stella had said about family? The words came back to her now: *Before there are nations, there are families.*

Anna pulled the bell rope near the bed. Where were those girls? And Jan—what in God's name was keeping him?

The pains seemed somehow different this time. What was it? Were they coming quicker? Sharper? More intense?

Until now she had been blessed in giving birth. Not so her mother, who had had notions of filling the house with sons after Anna's birth. Anna had always sensed that her own birth—the birth of a daughter—had been a

disappointment to her mother. There was aloofness in her mother's demeanor toward her, a coldness even, one that contrasted sharply with the sun-kissed love emanating from her father. Countess Teresa Berezowska steadfastly pursued her goal of bearing myriad sons, and there were multiple pregnancies, too, but only one that came to term. Anna closed her eyes, the thought of her infant brother bringing on the blur of tragedies that took him and her parents from her.

Anna pulled herself up against the goose down pillows. She would weather this, she told herself. She would have her family. Poland would go on, with or without its title or borders, with or without her. She would have her Jan and her children, all but one.

The door opened. Wanda and Jolanta crept in like mice. "Madame?" Jolanta asked, crossing half way to the bed. Wanda hung back near the door.

Anna cradled her belly with her hands. "My time is close. Is there no sign of my husband?"

Jolanta shook her head.

"Have you tended a birthing before?"

"No, Madame," Jolanta said. She addressed Anna in the French fashion in which Zofia had coached her, but these were not the sophisticated French maids Zofia had employed in the years before the nation's dissolution. These were country girls, no more than thirteen or fourteen, wide-eyed, fidgeting, and fully frightened at the prospect of delivering a child.

"Well, you are about to manage your first. Come here. Wanda, come away from the door. You will both earn your wages today and see life brought into the world."

Anna gave them their orders now, telling them exactly what would be needed. She spoke in plain terms and without visible panic. She had to keep her head if they were to keep theirs.

They scurried from the room then, still like frightened mice, but mice on a mission.

"Oh, Lutisha," Anna said aloud, "if only you were here." The old and trusted servant had already claimed her eternal reward for a simple life lived well. She had seen Anna through her three previous births, starting with that of Jan Michał, a child born out of rape. But she would not be here this time, with her large, capable hands. Dear, superstitious Lutisha! She would not be here to tie around the infant's wrist a little piece of red yarn to ward away the evil eye.

What seemed a long while passed.

"Wanda!" Anna called out. "Jolanta! Do hurry!"

Anna pushed the pillows out from under her head, shoving them down to lend support to her legs.

Anna called again. This baby was not to be put off.

Just then she heard a commotion on the stairs. The girls had left open the bedchamber door. A man's voice now. Jan's? Yes, she became certain that it

was indeed his and her heart lifted. Then came the high-pitched panic of the mice in return. And now a fourth voice, mature and masculine, but strange and gravel-like. A man's voice, surely.

"Anna!" Jan came rushing into the room some minutes later. "I've brought help."

"Where?"

"In the kitchen with the girls."

"Thank God. A doctor. Oh, thank God."

"Not a doctor, dearest. None to be found."

"No? A midwife, then?"

Jan came to the side of the bed. He took Anna's hand. "Well, yes, she says she has assisted."

"What do you mean—" Anna stopped mid-sentence, her eyes widening as the door opened.

A woman clad in a gray and grimy dress came into the room then, hissing in a husky sort of way and prodding ahead of her the maids with their burdens. She was short of stature but large in presence. "You," she told Jolanta, "put the ewer on that table. And you," she said nodding to Wanda, "put the pan and towels there, too. Then wait outside the door until I call for you both. Stay at hand, do you hear?"

Anna thought the puzzlement on the maids' faces as they left could only be mirrors to her own.

"Now, let's have a look at you," the woman said, adjusting the red kerchief that covered thin, graying hair. She approached the side of the bed.

Jan, who had been shifting from one foot to the other, had to drop Anna's hand and step back to allow the woman access. "This is Mira, Anna." And then to the woman: "This is the Lady Stelnicka."

The woman said nothing.

Anna looked up at the dark and serious face coming near her, the hooded eyes like ebony stones above a sharp nose peering down at her as if she were a curiosity. Her hand went to Anna's forehead. "You... you have experience?" Anna asked.

"You need not worry, milady," the woman said, her tone anything but deferential. "How long have the pains been coming?"

It was the first of several questions, and as Anna answered them she tried to decipher the look on Jan's face. He no doubt felt the awkwardness of a man caught up in women's business, but she sensed he was closely watching her reactions, too, as if to determine whether the results of his quest met with her approval.

Anna's dizzying thoughts for a short while superseded the pains. A gypsy! He had brought a gypsy into the house to birth their child. Oh, she had nothing against gypsies—on feast days she had never failed to send food to the little colony that collected at the cemetery—but were there no doctors, no mid-wives in all of Warsaw? How had Jan come upon her—this Mira?

Did she truly have experience or had she seen in Jan's desperation her own fortune? A way to gain entrance to a noble's home? A noble's munificence?

But there was no time for further thought. Anna, her face bleeding perspiration, became consumed with the ever-increasing pains, and her body unwillingly writhed now as if below a hot spring were building, as if the greatest hurt of her life were imminent. Had she forgotten her other pregnancies, the price of motherhood? No, she had not. This time was different, she was certain, more difficult than before, more difficult than she could have imagined. And more dangerous.

What was the woman doing now? The activity around her played like a visual and auditory blur. Moment by moment the effort siphoned her strength, leaving a mist of confusion and weakness.

Her mind snapped to attention then as she heard the gypsy dismissing Jan from the room. No! she wanted to call out but found no reservoir of energy to manage a sound. Suddenly she felt his hand holding hers, squeezing it tightly, as if to transfer hope into it.

Before her eyes could focus, before she could even return the pressure, she heard Mira's sharp and mannish voice again, driving Jan from the room and calling in the servant girls. Now came the sound of his boot heels retreating over the wooden floor. Anna lifted her hand—the hand he had held—to her lips, praying she would see Jan again, bask again in the cobalt blue of his eyes.

She heard Jolanta and Wanda come in, heard their gasps at the sight of her. Jan's departure crushed her calm. Fear ratcheted upward. Would she survive this? Would the child survive?

The woman drew aside the sheet and lifted Anna's gown. Anna felt her legs pushed toward her and apart, knees toward the ceiling. The woman's roughened hands moved over Anna's belly and below.

A minute later she felt a tug beneath her left arm. "You will sit back against the headboard," the woman said, instructing Jolanta to help in the lifting from the other side.

"No!" Anna fought against the two. She had never heard of such a thing. But she was no match for the strength of the two at either side. Pain ripped through her as they pulled her as if tugging at a sack of grain.

"Is good. Is good for the delivery." The woman shoved a pillow behind Anna's back. "I birthed three sons with my back against a tree. Is good."

The woman's recollection had no effect on Anna, who tried to stifle her screams as the contractions came, the attempts sometimes failing. The scalding spring below was moving now. The baby was coming. Did this woman know what she was doing? If only Lutisha were here. She would console her, reassure her, give her something to hold on to.

*Something to hold on to...* Anna began to mutter. Mira ignored her at first, but as Anna persisted, the woman asked Wanda what it was she was mumbling. When the maid leaned close to Anna's mouth, Anna managed to whisper, "My rosary, Wanda, please, my rosary. Upstairs."



The girl relayed the message to Mira and—God bless her!—hurried from the chamber without waiting for the woman's approval.

Time and pain seemed to draw Anna into some dark and fearsome labyrinth. The gypsy plied her with a foul-tasting herbal brew. The room swam about her. Anna attempted to lie down but was held firmly in place against the oak headboard.

"Listen to me!" The woman grasped Anna's upper shoulders, her fingers pinching like pincers. "The baby will come easier this way."

The pain had reached its zenith when she felt someone take her hand.

"Here it is, Lady Anna," Wanda whispered. "Your rosary."

Anna felt the beads in her hand, fingered them. Managing to lift her hand, she peered at them through wet-stained eyes. These were not her usual coral beads. These were amber beads from Lithuania, sent back to her—in the care of Michał—from a dying Tadeusz. A final gift from her son—hers and Jan's.

Later, she would be tempted to tell Jan that the spirit of their son filled the room at that moment, that the pain drained away, as did uncertainty. Strength seeped back into her body, and she knew everything would be all right. Tadek is here, she would remember thinking. Tadek is here.

And yet what seemed like hours passed—and with it, hope—the contractions and wrenching pain continuing in rises and cadences without end. Her confidence and strength all but gone, Anna became convinced she would not survive and could only pray that her little daughter would.

"The head is coming," the gypsy said, matter-of-factly, as if to say *someone is at the door*. "Push!" she barked. "Lean forward! Push now!"

Anna obeyed. The pain heightened. Anna called out as she was urged to push yet again. She closed her eyes against the hurt, but the salvo of white heat invaded her entire being, body and mind. She screamed like a hag on All Hallows.

"It is here," the woman said.

The pain suddenly ebbed and Anna fell back against the headboard, her head striking it, her heart thumping crazily. She closed her eyes against the spinning of the room, listening for the sound of the baby that had been taken from her.

The room had gone silent. Neither the servant girls nor the gypsy offered a word.

Something was wrong. Her daughter had not survived. Was it stillborn, like several of her mother's babes?

A coldness, like a hand made of ice, clutched her heart and she was about to call out when the noise came. The baby was being slapped. Hard. Once, then a second time.

Then, loud and lusty, a cry from the little lungs filled the room.

"Listen to its strong cry," the gypsy announced. "It is the cry of a strong boy."

With slaps like that, Anna wanted to say, any baby would let go a great wail. Instead, she asked for her baby. The insufferable woman was wrong, she told herself. It could not be a boy. She was certain.

"In good time," Mira said. "In good time. You both need to be tended to first." Mira worked at tending Anna while Wanda and Jolanta, bubbling with youthful wonder, bathed the baby in the porcelain wash basin.

Then, when Anna finally held the naked little creature in the crux of her arm, she had to face the truth. It was indeed a boy and the fears of bringing another boy into the world resurfaced. Tears formed at once, blurring and stinging her eyes.

Lutisha would have consoled her, would have wiped away her trepidation with the tears. The bleary gray figure hovering over her did neither.

Jan entered the chamber now, smiling despite his fragile state of nerves. His smile soured quickly when he saw her expression. "What is it, Anna? The baby—is—?"

"The baby is fine, milord," Mira said. "Is a fine boy."

"Then what is it?" Jan pressed. "Anna?"

Anna held back her tears, but she could not reply.

"The mother is fine," Mira blurted. "Sometimes it is this way with the mother. After the birth." She was washing her hands in preparation to leave. "It will pass."

Had she washed her hands before tending her? Anna wondered. She could not recall.

Where were the emotional and physical relief and the joy that had come with the three previous births? Would this darkness pass? Turning her head to the wall, she listened to the final exchange between her husband and the midwife, the tinkling sounds of coins being passed along with whispered words, and then the door's closing behind the woman.

"Now, what's wrong, Anna?" Jan came and sat at her bedside. "Mira says the baby is healthy."

Anna turned toward him, simultaneously cradling the baby tightly against her side. "I won't have it," she spat out. "I won't!"

"What, Anna? What?"

Jolanta and Wanda were gathering things together. Anna waited for them to leave the bedchamber, then said, "I won't lose another son to the military. I won't!"

"Ah! Is that it?" he soothed. "Such a worry. He is but a baby, Anna."

"Yes, and so was Tadeusz! Dear sweet Tadek, left frozen now on the tundra in Napoleon's wake. You must promise me, Jan. You must. Poland or no Poland—I will not lose another!"

"Very well. I will offer no encouragement."

"No, Jan, if necessary you will prevent him. You know as well as I that children are what you make them. It's more than just a saying."

Jan smiled down at her, a bit solicitously she thought. For a moment

she was tempted to tell him about Tadek's rosary and the little miracle it had worked, but he was kneeling at the bedside now, taken up with the pink little bundle that was their son. And he might, she thought, think it merely a woman's silly notion.

"Mira didn't do so badly by you, I see," he said.

Anna nodded, wordlessly conceding agreement. "But she doesn't have Lutisha's loving manner, I can tell you that."

"Still, she managed everything just as efficiently?"

Anna seized on one difference: "Everything but the little red yarn Lutisha would have tied about his wrist to ward off the evil eye."

"What's this, then?" Jan asked, lifting the baby's little leg to reveal a red string tied at the ankle.

Anna gave a half-smile, but the amazement faded quickly. She took and held her husband's gaze with her own. "Jan, what did that woman say to you just now?"

Jan's smile seemed to go false. "Why, she—she merely named her price."

"There was more said than that."

"A bit of bargaining, that's all."

Anna knew this was untrue. She was certain her husband would never bargain for the birth of his son. "You are a poor liar, Jan. We have kept secrets from one another in the past, but we've not lied to one another—or am I mistaken?"

"No, Anna, you are not mistaken."

"Then I ask you again: What did the gypsy say to you?"

Jan swallowed hard and took good time to divest himself of the words. "She said, 'The boy will one day bait the Russian bear'."

Anna sank back into her pillows. Even as her eyes grew large, they lost focus. Jan and the details of her surroundings blurred, receded. Her heart began to race. She immediately thought of how, upon the very day of the late King Stanisław's birth, an astrologer announced to a disbelieving Poniatowski family with no claim to the throne: "Hail to you, Your Majesty, King of Poland!" Some thirty-two years later, aided by his lover Empress Catherine and her Russian troops, the astrologer's prediction was vindicated when Stanisław Poniatowski was elected King of Poland.

Many believed it was no story, no legend. Anna herself believed there was truth in such augury. After all, a friend of Anusia Potecka's family was in the room for the event. Was her son, she wondered, heart quickening, not yet an hour old, fated to go against the imperialist enemy to the East? She had already lost so much to the Russians. Was he, like his father and brothers, to be bred for the military? It was her greatest fear. No! Not while her body was home to breath.

"I'm thinking," Jan said, "we should call him Józef. After Prince Józef Poniatowski, the nephew of the last King of Poland."

Anna bristled. "After a soldier? A man who died in battle?"

Jan nodded. "After a prince, a general, and a hero, Anna."

Anna did not respond.

Jan whispered close to her ear now: "You're thinking of Mira's words. They are merely words, Ania." No one since her father's death had spoken her diminutive with such tenderness. "They are words from an old woman who imagines herself to have special powers." He continued in soothing tones, attempting to assuage her fears, but the only words she heard now were the gypsy's: "The boy will one day bait the Russian bear."

# PART ONE



You cannot Escape  
Your Fate  
—POLISH PROVERB



# 1

## 3 MAY 1830, SOCHACZEW

ON THIS MONDAY, THE THIRTY-NINTH anniversary of a day Poles were forbidden to remember, the Stelnicki family gathered at Topolostan, their estate in Sochaczew, west of Warsaw, under the guise of celebrating Michał's thirty-eighth birthday.

As the family began to assemble in the dining hall of the manor home, Michał, body rigid and eyes alert, stood alone at the window of the reception room, peering out at the long avenue that curved down from the main road. He shaded his eyes against the afternoon sun that glinted through the bordering poplars and sent reflections shimmering off the twin ponds situated on either side of the avenue.

The message had arrived that morning and Michał, seldom prescient, could not put to rest the thought that his life was about to change. Interpreting the presentiment as wholly unfounded and unwelcome, he tried to shake it. Nonetheless, his fingers drummed the window sill.

"Michał," his mother called, "come in to dinner." At that moment he caught sight of movement in the distance, a rolling cloud of dust coming closer, closer, passing now into the estate's avenue. He watched as the vehicle came into view. It was a sleek black carriage drawn by four white stallions, a fitting conveyance for Prince Adam Czartoryski.

Michał moved quickly out of the reception room.

"I wondered where you had gone," Anna said, standing at the doorway to the dining hall. "Come in, Michał."

"Mother, I have a guest arriving. I'll join you in a little while."

"A guest? Now?"

Michał nodded.

"A friend? Then bring him in. I'll have an extra place set."

"No," Michał said, providing a swift kiss on the cheek. A whisper now at her ear: "Please don't ask questions. We'll talk later."

"A mystery?" The amber flecks in her green eyes sparkled with amusement. Michał's eyes went to his sister Barbara, younger by five years, and her

husband as they assisted seating their two-year-old twin boys. He allowed no time for his fierce emotions regarding his sister's marriage to surface. Instead, he smiled at his mother. "Later, when everyone's gone home."

Before she could respond, he shooed her into the dining hall and pushed closed the mullioned French doors. Behind the glass now, in colorful finery, the diners seemed to him like tropical fish.

Michał hurried to the front portico, hospitality symbol for every Polish manor house, thinking that perhaps he and the prince should converse outside, but he rejected the idea as unworthy of a host welcoming a man of such stature, a statesman and one of Poland's wealthiest magnates. Later, when he had learned the full details of the prince's visit and witnessed the curiosity the visitant aroused among the guests, he would regret the decision.

Prince Adam Czartoryski gave him a smile—sincere yet serious—as he climbed the three steps to the portico's platform. Introductions were formal. The prince was a generation older and had known Michał's stepfather Jan, but this was Michał's first meeting with him. All the more reason for the mystery of the occasion. Why had he come?

Michał ushered him into the house, hurrying him past the dining hall, hoping that those seated at table would not happen to glance through the glassed doors and wonder at the guest. They moved into the reception room and, once they were inside the commodious chamber, Michał made quick work of pulling closed the oak doors. Here they would have privacy.

"Please be seated, your grace," Michał said, already setting up two crystal glasses. "Vodka?"

"Yes, thank you." The prince would not offend his host with a refusal. He remained standing. "I came at a bad time, I see. You're entertaining, it seems. A celebration of the Third of May Constitution, no doubt."

Michał grimaced. "It was to have been, but that was before we knew my brother-in-law was coming. So now, for the sake of appearances we are celebrating my birthday."

The prince gave a quizzical look. He had an unusually long face, distinctive features, and small, piercing eyes, more gray than blue. Michał took him for sixty, but a handsome man, just the same.

"My sister Barbara married a Russian, you see." Michał passed a glass to the prince, then held his gaze in a meaningful way, brown on blue. "A civil servant in Warsaw, no less."

"Ah, I see. Discretion is the best policy.... And you were born on the third of May? Truly?"

"Yes, 1792, a year after the Constitution."

"Those were heady times."

"And all but gone, Constitution and independence—before I was even three." Michał took up his own glass. "Regrettable. A national tragedy."

The prince let out a poignant sigh. "Ah, it does seem as if the Russian interlopers have been with us always."



But not always at our tables, Michał thought.

The prince raised his glass. "To the Constitution!" The glasses were properly emptied. Michał and the prince seated themselves across from one another. Each took turns at small talk about the weather and the spring planting. When it was played out, a silence ensued.

At last, the prince gave the slightest shake of his head. "I've been caught up in politics all of my life, my boy. I still am and it's politics that brings me to Sochaczew. I've come to enlist your aid."

"My aid?" Michał was thunderstruck. The thought that such a great man had come to see him was more than a mystery. It was a wonder, as was the thought that he could be of some help to the prince. "I just cannot imagine what you could want with me, your grace. I haven't been involved in the military, if one even calls that politics, since Waterloo."

"You were there—with his Polish lancers, I know. That Napoleon had chosen Polish lancers for his Imperial Guard speaks volumes. And as doomed as his grand plan was, his Polish Lancers did us proud. I congratulate you."

"No need. I was one of the few to survive. And I've given all that up. I don't think militarily anymore. I manage my mother's estate here. I avoid politics. I even avoid going to the capital as much as possible."

"Out of sight, out of mind?"

Michał forced a smile.

"Lady Stelnicka, your mother, how is she?"

"She puts on a strong front. She misses Father terribly." A shudder ran through Michał as he recalled his father's arrest in '26 for his membership in the Patriotic Society. How they had tried him and others of the club for being sympathizers with the 1825 Decembrists' plot in Russia against the new tsar, Nicholas, who was so much more the severe autocrat than his predecessor, Tsar Aleksander. How ignominiously his father had been bound and taken from his home and beloved Poland. "It's as if Russia swallowed him whole."

"Has there been no word, Michał?"

"None," Michał said, shaking his head. "If he's alive, he is most likely in some godforsaken camp in Siberia."

"What about you, are you... content here? After having led a soldier's life for so long? You had gone to Moscow with the little Corsican, too, yes? And lived to tell about *that*!"

"I did," Michał said. He found himself blinking back tears that sprang spontaneously. "But my brother Tadeusz did not."

"I'm sorry for that, Michał.... Forgive me, I am a clumsy conversationalist today to remind you of so much sadness. Perhaps I shouldn't keep you in the dark any longer about my... visit. And... what shall I call it?—a *mission*, perhaps."

"Mission?"

The prince nodded. "First, a few facts. But before that, I think we should

have another vodka. What say you?" He managed a laugh. "The road to Sochaczew is dry and dusty."

And, Michał thought, the road to the prince's purpose is circuitous. "Of course, your grace." Michał went to the table by the window and returned with the decanter. "Good Polish stuff!"

The prince stood to make the toast. "Sto Lat!"

"Ah!" Michał intoned at the birthday toast that called for a century of living. "I appreciate the sentiment, your grace, but I can't say I wish to live a hundred years."

"At least not under Russian rule, yes? Your Polish blood is true, young Michał. Well, then, to what shall we toast?" The prince paused only a moment. "I have it. To a brighter tomorrow, free of foreigners' rule!"

"Now that I'll drink to!"

The two drank down the vodka at once, in the Polish fashion.

As the prince settled back into the high-winged chair, his expression went dark. "Times have become very dangerous in Warsaw. Dangerous for Poland. While we have been given more freedom than we might have expected under Russian rule—we've kept the Sejm and a Polish military—there are always those who yearn for the days of the Constitution and independence, those who wish to throw off Tsar Nicholas' yoke altogether. I can empathize with such feelings but having seen what I've seen, I've become a cautious man. Things carelessly done can create havoc."

Michał sat now. "Like interminable winter marches to Moscow?"

"Exactly. Although the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians have claimed so much of our former nation, we still have this shrunken entity called the Congress Kingdom of Poland, this by the so-called good graces of the Congress of Vienna. It is a ghost of its former self, and insult to injury is suffering a Russian tsar as our king. Ah, but despite these things, Poland remains. It endures. Why, even beyond the new boundaries our people retain our language, our faith, and our heritage."

"That's all very well," Michał said, leaning forward, "but what freedom do we really have? You mentioned the Sejm and the military. You know as well as I that the men making laws in the Sejm are answerable to the Grand Duke Konstantin who is, himself, Commander of the Polish Army."

"You're right, of course," the prince said, one eyebrow lifting slightly.

"And forgive me, your grace, but isn't it true that old General Zajączek, having been raised to Prince and named Viceroy of Warsaw, has become but a tool of Konstantin? In fact, would I be mischaracterizing things if I were to say that true patriots in all branches of government have been supplanted by Poles who are nothing more than Russian sycophants?"

The prince's gray-blue eyes seemed to simmer. "You would not."

"You asked if I'm content here. I was a soldier, bred to the bone, as you correctly implied. I stayed with Napoleon through to the end. He said his Polish Imperial Guard was the best in the world. When I came back from

Waterloo, I continued on in my service in Warsaw. But under Konstantin, the army—Polish or no—became a blood brother to the government in its movement to rid our country of any sense of nationalism and make us thralls of Russia. The liberty of the press was denied. Freemasonry was forbidden. Under Tsar Aleksander things had been somewhat tolerable, but when Nicholas succeeded him and the Grand Duke Konstantin—his brother, and Grand Tyrant, I say—arrived in Warsaw, I asked to be dismissed. I found it preferable to the degradation and depression so many other soldiers endured. They say half of the officers and generals asked for dismissal. Many others, among both officers and enlisted men, committed suicide. So, you see, my *contentment* here matters little. Family is here. The old ways are here. I'm needed."

The prince sighed. A little nod seemed to validate Michał's speech. "Allow me to present my case, Jan Michał." That he employed Michał's full Christian name presaged a serious turn in the prince's mood. "It's our own military that concerns me. You see, there are two young officers at the Officer Cadets School whose careers are stalled. They have become bored with a sedentary military life and—"

"Wait a moment, your grace. Does your visit have something to do with my brother Józef? He's a cadet there. Of course, you must know that."

The prince's eyes held Michał's. "I do know that." He smiled tightly. "Please allow me to go on."

Michał nodded. The mystery was unfolding too slowly—and he was beginning to like none of it.

"The two firebrands I'm speaking of are burning with romantic dreams of personal heroism and patriotic notions of national independence."

"Typical, yes? The relentless Polish dream of glory?"

"True, Michał, and all too often a false dream. I can tell you that these two have wrongfully fired up the young cadets with their zeal."

"Like my brother?"

The prince nodded. "Most likely. And it is a dangerous zeal."

"I don't think we should allow that dream of independence to die. With all due respect, Lord Czartoryski, are you not aligned with Russia?"

"Touché. If I were you I would be questioning my motives, as well. It is true that as a young man I was a great friend to Tsar Nicholas' brother. But Tsar Aleksander was a cut of a different cloth. A much finer cloth."

"You were in his cabinet."

"Ah, yes. Oh, Aleksander had great plans for Poland in the early days. He was very liberal in his thinking. He agreed with me that an independent Poland, one serving as a barrier to Prussian aggression, was to Russia's advantage."

"What happened?"

"Aleksander vacillated. He couldn't come to decisive action regarding our independence. And then events took over, Napoleon being one of them."

Michał stared into his empty glass. "And now we're left with Tsar Nicholas

as King of our shrunken kingdom and his brother Konstantin ensconced in Warsaw as Imperial Commissioner and Commander of the Army.”

“Indeed. And although the Grand Duke Konstantin claims to be more Pole than Russian because he has married Lady Joanna Grudzińska and calls himself Polish, you can be sure he is true to Mother Russia. He has a volatile temperament and if given the opportunity, he would walk over his mother’s grave to pluck a candy from a child’s hand.”

“As would Tsar Nicholas—”

“Ah, there is much to fear with *him*—and in the arm of the secret police here in Warsaw.”

“The Third Department?” Michał asked.

“Yes, overseen by the Imperial Commissioner, General Nikolai Novosiltsev. He and I were two of Aleksander’s three most trusted advisers in the old days. And Nikolai was a friend to me. But the years have corrupted him and turned his thoughts dark against Poland.”

Michał nodded. “They’re known to torture prisoners.”

“Hah! If that were only all.”

“And he has wind of the cadets’ dissension?”

“I’m certain he does.”

“Who are the two you spoke of? The firebrands, as you call them.”

“A second lieutenant named Wysocki and a Colonel Zaliwski. They are putting together a plot, Michał. No doubt a very dangerous plot. They’re too young to know the hardships that came with the dismemberment of the Republic in ‘95, too young to know that the battlefield affords little lasting glory, as you and I know. It affords more blood, bashing of brains, missing limbs, and death than anything. They don’t understand how hard we’ve worked to carve out this Congress Kingdom of Poland, albeit under the aegis of Russia and the eye of Nicholas’ brother. Men such as Wysocki and Zaliwski could lose it all for us.”

“Is it so serious?” Michał asked. “Can two dreamers really do anything? Perhaps they’ve read too much nationalistic poetry, my lord, too many verses from Adam Mickiewicz.”

“It’s not to be made light of, Michał.” The prince leaned forward. “The cadets alone may or may not do any real damage, but their instigation of some big event could muster the voices and arms of the many who have suffered decades of a poorly masked tyranny.”

“What plot, my lord?”

“That’s just the thing, Michał. We don’t know.”

“And—I?” Michał asked although he was certain he had already divined the direction of the prince’s thoughts.

“Józef is your brother. If he is one of the insurgents—or if he merely knows one of the insurgents—he can provide us with needed information.”

“So I’m to be a spy then—on my young brother?”

“There is much at stake here, Michał.”

Michał attempted a smile. "I'm sorry you have come all this way, your grace. Certainly there are others in Warsaw who can infiltrate the Cadets Academy."

"None that can be trusted." The prince's eyes narrowed. "None I can count on."

"Why me?"

"I know your family by the sacrifices you've made. I knew—I know—your father." He paused, as if he had just played his best card, then continued: "My friends at the capital and I am watched day and night by the Russian secret police. It took no little doing for my driver to shake off a Russian detail following us today. We had to exit the back door of an inn to make our escape. In short, Michał, the fact that you are removed from the activities in Warsaw means that you would not arouse suspicion."

"Still, your grace, I do have my duties here. And I have no wish to interfere in Józef's life."

"In his *interest*, Michał."

"Shhh! Did you hear that?" Michał whispered.

The prince shrugged. "It escaped me. I heard nothing."

With a finger to his mouth, Michał motioned. "Outside the door," he mouthed. "The floorboards."

The prince rose and stood silently while Michał made for the door, pulling it open at once. Nothing. The hallway was empty.

He stepped out, turning just in time to see the dining hall doors being pulled closed.

Someone had been in the hall. The question was, had he—or she—heard anything of his conversation with the prince?

Michał stepped back into the reception room. "Nothing," he said, shrugging, attempting to ignore a knotting of uneasiness in his stomach.

"I should go. I've overstayed my welcome." The prince retrieved his hat from the table. "It's probably just a matter of time before the Russian detail ferrets me out even though we took well-travelled roads so as not to leave tracks leading to your door.... Michał, I do hope you don't doubt my motives because of my past associations with Russia. I am thinking only of Poland."

"I do not doubt that, your grace." Michał spoke the truth.

"Ah, well, I've made my case, but it was not my intention in coming here to pressure you in any way. You needn't decide now." The prince smiled. "I'm certain your judgment is equal to your hearing. Contact me in the capital should you wish to help. Discreetly, of course. I am closely watched."

Michał nodded. His mind was in a ferment.

"You know my residence?"

"Yes," Michał replied, suppressing a laugh. Everyone knew the very impressive Czartoryski mansion.

"I'm sure you're of good use here, Jan Michał, but you may have a higher calling." The prince shook Michał's hand, the earnest gray-blue eyes piercing

Michał. "A fine man, your father. How proud Jan must be of you, Michał. I'll shake a few trees. I'll see what I can find out about his whereabouts."

"Would you, your grace? My mother and I would be so grateful."

"No promises, my boy."

"No, no, of course not. Now if you don't mind, your grace, please allow me to show you out through the rear of the house." Michał forced a little laugh. "Forgive me, but discretion starts at home."



Michał had played the hospitable role expected at the home of the szlachta, the minor nobility, but he was greatly relieved to see the roiling dust from the black carriage of a magnate moving down the estate's avenue, heading for the main road that would take the prince and his "mission" back to Warsaw. Good riddance, he thought. Prince or no, statesman or no, what nerve had he to arrive on short notice with such a request? Aside from not wishing to interfere in young Józef's life at the Cadets Academy, Michał had no intention of getting caught up in the old dreams, the old fire of independence, the old disappointments. He had lost too many years in the efforts, in the pains. He turned to go back into the house. Gone were the days of the enemies at the gates—the Swedes, Austrians, Turks, Prussians, Cossacks, Russians. No, the enemy was within now. The man who dared call himself King of Poland was the Russian tsar. Poland, it seemed, would always serve the wishes and whims of others. What was there that *he* could do about it? He resented the prince's visit and the tacit sense of patriotism and responsibility it was meant to incite. Hadn't he done enough for his nation, a nation that, in truth, was no more than a ghost of its former self?

Entering the house, Michał impulsively moved to the reception room where he drank down another vodka. His thoughts stayed with a particular facet of the exchange he had just experienced: namely, the intimation that the prince might be able to find something out about his father's whereabouts in Russia. *How that would please Mother! Might he also be able to do something about freeing her husband? Or—is this a masterful play to engage me in the "mission"?*

Torn by the emotion of the moment, he sent his vodka glass crashing into the fireplace. The sheer volume of the explosion startled him enough to clear his mind for the moment. He went directly to the dining hall.

"Michał," Anna said, watching him enter, "you've missed dinner. We're having our pudding."

"So I see. Cranberry kissel!" he exclaimed, affecting a festiveness he did not feel. "It's my favorite. And it's not even Christmas Eve!"

"Cranberries are plentiful this year," Anna said. "You'll have it on Christmas Eve, too, as ever."

"A great relief," Michał joked, settling himself across from his sister's

family, in the chair next to Zofia, who was attired in a revealing rose satin gown. "I apologize to you, Mother, and to everyone for my tardiness."

Anna directed Marcelina to prepare a plate for Michał.

"Was it an important guest?" Zofia asked. In a side glance, Michał saw her wink at Anna, her black eyes glittering. "A woman, perhaps?"

"Would that it were, Cousin Zofia. But, alas, I was not so lucky." Michał hoped she would drop the subject, but he suspected his mother's cousin was not about to let it go. Inwardly, he sighed in relief that she evidently had not seen the prince pass the dining hall's mullioned doors.

"Well, who was it, Michał?" Zofia pressed.

Michał felt his mouth tighten. He stared across the table at the two-year-old twins, bookended by their parents. Handsome little boys. One had been given a Polish name, Konrad; the other, Russian, Dimitri. Which was which?

"Zofia," Anna asked, "will you have some more pudding?"

"No, Anna, my stomach has been well sated, thank you. It's my curiosity that has not been satisfied." She turned back to Michał. "Tell me, Michał. Whisper it in my ear if you must."

Michał was making much of taking a plate from the servant, attempting to feign composure. "I assure you, Cousin Zofia, it was no one of any importance."

"No one of any importance?" The irony in the deep male voice rang like an abbey's bell.

Michał slowly lifted his eyes to the speaker directly across from him, his brother-in-law Viktor, whose comment commanded the attention of everyone at the table. The Russian's eyes were pale blue, cold, self-assured. The coldness penetrated Michał's heart. He knew at once that the prince's visit had not escaped *everyone's* notice. He returned Viktor's stare. "That is correct," Michał said, his voice flat. "No one of any importance."

"Perhaps no longer," Viktor said, "but in his day he carried some weight."

So the prince had been seen *and* recognized. Michał dared a fixed look at Viktor. Had he been the one outside the reception room door? Had he heard any of the conversation? Michał said nothing, took a fork, and started to poke at the venison stew Marcelina had laid before him.

"So *you* know!" Zofia cried, directing herself to Viktor, oblivious to Michał's discomfiture. "You'll tell us then, Viktor."

Viktor smiled. He paused, allowing for the suspense to take hold.

"Well?" Barbara asked, turning to her husband.

Viktor kept his eyes trained on Michał. "It was Prince Adam Czartoryski." There was smugness in his voice as well as in his unwavering gaze across the table. "His importance may have waned with the years, brother Michał, but I would not say he's of no importance."

*Brother!* Michał fumed at the sarcastic familial term. With just his peripheral vision he sensed his mother was closely watching him with concern that he might create a scene. He felt himself paling. He would not be the



cause of ruining his mother's celebratory meal. His attention was quickly claimed by Zofia.

"Lord Adam Czartoryski!" Zofia cried. "Adam! And he didn't have the politeness to give greeting?"

Michał turned to her. "It was politeness that kept him from doing so, Cousin Zofia. He didn't want to disturb our meal which was just starting."

"You are acquainted with the prince in question?" Viktor asked Zofia.

Zofia was flushing—with what emotion Michał could not decipher.

"He was more than an acquaintance, I daresay," Zofia said, the slitted black eyes wide now and glinting. "Why, I—I nearly married Adam Czartoryski! It was a few years ago, of course."

"A few?" Anna chided.

"Why didn't you, cousin?" Barbara asked.

Zofia needed no further prompting. "You see, the prince had been a close friend and confidant of Tsar Aleksander, and he was completely besotted by the tsar's wife, Elizabeth. It had been a marriage of convenience, of course, and Aleksander actually sanctioned the budding romance between Adam and the tsarina. Can you imagine! The times we live in! How the gossips wagged about that. Ah, but when Adam suggested his friend divorce her, well, that's where it ended. A royal divorce, if you please? Not a chance in hell. No, it was Adam's relationship with Aleksander's wife that ended—and quite abruptly."

"As it should have," Viktor said, his voice almost harsh.

"Does my story of your past tsar offend?" Zofia asked. "I can assure you it's quite true. And that it broke poor Adam's heart."

"But what about you and the prince, Cousin Zofia?" Barbara asked.

"Ah, it would have been a fine match, don't you think, Basia? Just fine. A magnate like that. But, young as I was, I could tell he was on the rebound, as they say. He was interested, I can tell you, but I chose to put him off until such a time as he would forget his simpering little Tsarina Elizabeth and be prepared for a woman."

"You," Anna teased, only to be rewarded with a raised and well-drawn eyebrow.

"And?" Barbara asked.

Zofia shrugged, and though she had finished her cranberry kissel, she made a show of bringing a thimbleful to her reddened lips. "It was a lethal misjudgment on my part, my dear. While I dithered, a ruthless old woman pushed her daughter on to him when my back was turned, and before I knew it his attention had been claimed. Not that he married her, mind you. Then, years later, he did marry. Would you believe it, a child bride twenty years his junior! Once, not so long ago when I met him at a ball, he told me that letting me go was the biggest mistake of his life. Well," she sighed dramatically, "he lives with his regrets now."

With that, one of the twins began to make a fuss—Dimitri, Michał thought—and the subject mercifully came to an end.





Michał sat alone at the table. The dishes and silver had been cleared. Nearby he could hear the sounds of the servants going about their kitchen tasks. From outside came the cheerfully excited voices of the twins and the muted goodbyes of adults being made. He had refused to see his sister's family off. Oh, he had been prepared to bite his tongue and attempt a smile in order to play the polite brother-in-law, but that was before Viktor fired his parting shot. He could feel blood rising into his face anew at the thought. He would never—could never—accept Viktor Baklanov as a member of the family. The thought disgusted him. In the future, he decided, he would avoid him at all costs, even if it meant foregoing family events. He abhorred hypocrisy.

He was still at the dining table brooding and peering into his coffee cup when Anna returned from seeing Barbara and her family to their carriage for the return trip to Warsaw.

"Did Cousin Zofia go with them?" Michał asked.

"She did. And she said you should come for a visit—that it would do Izabel a world of good."

"Why didn't she come with her mother?"

Anna seated herself across the table from Michał. Although her auburn hair had silvered of late, her smooth complexion and the amber coruscation in the emerald eyes lent her youth. "According to Zofia, her years in the convent have made her terribly shy."

"But she's been out for a year."

"Still, I think it's difficult for her to move in Zofia's sphere."

Michał emitted a sarcastic laugh. "I can believe that. Did you note her dress? Zofia must be—what? Sixty?"

"Sweet Jesus," Anna said, her voice a low hiss, "don't let her hear you say that! She's fifty-seven and be careful not to slip on your own doorstep, Michał, for I'm but a year behind her."

"But she still thinks she's quite the ingénue. What with that rose gown and lime green bonnet, she resembles a great tropical bird."

Anna laughed, too. "A rare one at that. A bird of paradise, perhaps. And she will be thinking she's the ingénue well into her dotage, I'm afraid. That is my dear cousin. Quite the coquette. You know that story about the prince?"

"Yes? A fabrication, I presume?"

"Oh, the facts about the younger Adam's infatuation with the tsarina were true enough, but he had not courted Zofia. On the contrary, he is one of the country's many magnates on whom she has set her bonnet—lime green and every other color—over the years. She had done everything to gain the prince's attention except hit him with a mallet—all to no avail." Anna laughed. "Isn't it amazing that one can lie with honeyed lips even while knowing that someone at table had been witness to the real history? But that is my dear cousin."

"Do you mean puddinged lips?" Michał asked with a laugh. "Sometimes I think we humans start to believe the history we spin out of our imagination. True history or no, she's an excellent raconteur. I give her credit for that." Michał was silent for a moment, then turned to his mother, a new heat coming into his face. "Did you hear what *he* said when he left?"

"Viktor?" his mother asked. "Yes, dear, I heard."

Michał sat forward, one hand pushing aside the cup and saucer. "Instead of wishing me well on my birthday, he said, 'Happy Constitution Day, Michał.' The ass! He knew all along what we were truly celebrating."

"I know. It would seem so. He was in his cups by then."

"And, as they say, wine makes a person transparent. So it was all a sham, Mother, this birthday business. He knows as well as anyone we celebrate my name day and not my birthday."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Michał. Barbara probably let it slip. You know she does that sometimes."

"It's not that that galls me, Mother. It's that he openly mocks our short-lived constitution and our attachment to it. His comment was an insult to every Pole."

"I understand your anger, Michał, but—"

"Damn it! Don't go making excuses for him. He's Russian to the core—in our house, eating our food, and finding faults. It's maddening! And what is this civil service job he has? Does anyone know? Does even Barbara know? My God, how I hate the man."

"There, there. Michał. It makes little difference now. He's in the family."

"Are you taking his side, for God's sake? This arrogant interloper! Has he won you over? Has his gimpy leg worked on your sympathy?"

"No, Michał. And to give him his due, he tries to disguise it as much as possible."

"Still, you forbade Barbara to marry him. You forbade her to ever bring him here. And yet she defied you on both counts. Admit it, Mother. You hate him as much as I!"

"Ah, Michał. Russians have always brought trouble. But Barbara Anna did marry him. She did bring him into the family. Their children are my grandchildren. Am I to deny them, too? My blood runs through their veins."

"And so does Father's blood. Your husband, who sits rotting in some Russian camp!"

"Michał!"

Michał drew in a deep breath, at once regretting his words. "I'm so sorry, Mother. Really. That was thoughtless." He longed to take her hands in his, but the width of the table precluded the gesture. "I guess Barbara isn't the only one to let things slip. It must be a Stelnicki trait."

His mother chuckled. "Well, you were tightlipped enough about the prince's visit. Are you going to tell me what brought him here?"

"Politics. Just politics."

"An offer of some kind—a position in the capital?"

"Something like that."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Not now."

"Very well, I'll respect that. But Michał, perhaps you should visit Zofia and her daughter for a week or so. Longer, if you wish. You know we can get on here just fine."

"Ah ha! You're thinking I'll find a place socially. You're thinking—"

"Michał, you're thirty-eight. You should be thinking of starting a family. And sequestered here on the estate you're not about to find someone."

"I hope you haven't plotted with Zofia for her to play matchmaker."

His mother's smile was indecipherable. "I would not go so far."

"Indeed? Well, what if I don't marry? I was off soldiering when men of my generation were finding wives. Look, you have two grandchildren, Mother. Don't be greedy."

"Yes, and I love them dearly, but I want some grandchildren who will carry a *Polish* surname! The Stelnicki name."

"Well, don't hate me if I am unable to deliver—or rather that some future bride of mine is long in the tooth and beyond child-bearing! Remember, you always have another bird in the hand. You always have—" Michał stopped mid-sentence.

"Józef? You were going to say 'Józef,' yes?" A shadow flickered momentarily across his mother's face, a darkening that reflected pain and hurt.

"What? Oh, yes—Józef. I'm sorry, I lost my train of thought." The truth of the matter was that he had no wish to worry his mother about the prince's speculation concerning Józef. And no wish to remind her further that Józef had defied her by joining the military. Michał bent to kiss Anna. "Mother, I told the stable master I'd discuss something with him after our meal. We'll talk later." As he proceeded to make his retreat, his memory checked him and he pivoted toward Anna. "Mother, while I was shut up in the reception room with Prince Czartoryski, someone left the dining hall. Do you recall who it was?"

"Of course, dear, Viktor left for a short while. Now do think about taking Zofia up on her invitation! Warsaw will do you a world of good!"



Princess Anna Maria Stelnicka stayed at her place in the dining hall. All traces of the celebratory meal had been removed from the table, as well as from her thoughts which had turned to her son Józef. If only Michał would visit Warsaw, she thought, he could look in on her youngest at the academy.

Despite her resolve to cultivate Józef's interest in music and steer him away from the paths of her husband and two older sons, the military had, like some mythical siren, managed to seduce her youngest. She had yet to

come to terms with her defeat. Only God knew what dangers he would face as a soldier.

Anna wished Jan were here to lend support. But would he—with his own military ways—have supported her, or Józef? And when she thought of Jan her serious thoughts turned darker.

Anna thought back to the day they came to take her husband away. Oh, she had known he had become active in the Patriotic Society, but who could have imagined that its members would be accused of complicity in a Russian plot to assassinate the tsar in faraway Moscow? *Had* the Society been involved? Jan had told her that he had not taken part in the conspiracy in any way, and she believed him. But the Third Department—the Russian secret police—cared little for the truth. They were interested only in making examples of men like Count Jan Stelnicki, former military heroes, men of stature and respect. Men of the nobility. He and two others had been sentenced to exile somewhere in the Russian Northern hinterlands. Anna's heart constricted as she recalled the day the three had been sent off. The families were allowed their goodbyes in the Castle Square prior to witnessing their loved ones' being hurried into the coach that would take them away. Because no one could recall any convict returning from Russia, such sentences usually meant severing ties forever. Russian soldiers linked hands, holding back a large crowd of Polish well-wishers, many weeping openly. Such a public spectacle for the last memory of her husband. It was the Russian way of making examples. It was their way to continue suppression.

Jan's hands were bound and hidden beneath the grubby greatcoat he wore so that it was she who had to embrace him. And it was only as Jan turned away and grasped hold of the carriage, pulling himself up into the coach, that she noticed that one of those hands was bandaged. "Sweet Jesus!" she called out. "What have they done to you, Jan?"

Jan turned and gifted her with a smile that said, *It's nothing, dearest. Just a scratch.* It was his way.

And then the carriage was wheeling away, taking the man she had thought vain, superficial, mocking—and handsome—so many years before when he had boldly approached her in a summer meadow in Halicz, the man whose character she had foolishly questioned, the man who waited for the duration of her arranged marriage, the man who had married her and become a devoted stepfather to Jan Michał and father to Tadeusz, Barbara Anna, and Józef.

They had had their separations, some lasting years while he fought side by side with Kościuszko and after that with the French in Italy and finally with Napoleon himself on the Eastern steppes. But he had come back. Like the faithful storks returning to their nests in the spring, he had come back. At that moment, though, watching that carriage move through Castle Square and descend toward the River Vistula and the Praga Bridge that would take them east, Anna had not managed to conjure the thinnest thread of hope that

she would ever see her Jan again. This time she could not bring herself to believe that he would come back.

Pain had overcome her there in the square, thrumming through her body, her pulse gone wild. This she could not, would not, endure. It was too much for one heart. While she was able to fend off tears, the old habit of tearing at her hair overcame her—until Michał took her hands away from her head. She thought she would pass out. The ground moved beneath her. She wished only for her life to end.

But when she turned to her children—the grown Michał, the nearly grown Barbara, and little Józef—three hearts huddled together, faces streaming tears, she drew herself up, kissed each on the forehead, and said, “Let’s go home. God’s teeth! We’ll not give the cursed Russians any further satisfaction.”

How ironic, Anna thought now, that today she should have to temper Michał’s anger at Viktor and his hatred of Russians. But who could have guessed that Barbara would fall in love with a Russian? Who can ever guess where the heart will lead? What would Jan think—if he has survived the brutal Russian wilds—to know he has half-Russian grandchildren?

Anna’s thoughts reluctantly came back to Józef—her last born—and the searing words of a gypsy woman she had often failed to keep in abeyance for the past seventeen years.

## WARSAW

**I**ZABEL GRONSKA SAT IN THE reception room near the window watching a purplish dusk descend on the capital. The Third of May celebrations in the city were small and secreted behind closed doors, but occasionally a bit of rebellious—and no doubt innocent—gunfire could be heard.

She had sat here as a child in this very spot, even into her twenties, those years before cloistered life. Growing up she had watched the outside world from this vantage point, wondering about, anticipating, and if she was honest, fearing the time when she would venture forth and grasp hold of life. So many things had changed, and yet her feelings at this moment were not much different. She was as unsettled now as she had been then, and it gave her pause.

Elzbieta knocked at the open double doors. “Would Mademoiselle wish something?”

Iza turned and smiled. “No, thank you, Elzbieta.”

“The carriage will likely arrive soon. A light supper has been prepared for the travelers, as Lady Gronska ordered.”

Iza nodded and the servant retreated to the recess of the town house.

Elzbieta was the daughter of Wanda, who—aside from a few years prior to being widowed—had been in Zofia's service many years. She was sincere and attentive, but after doing for herself and others for years, Iza found it odd being waited on once again.

How like her mother to have ordered a little late supper in advance. She had probably given explicit menu requests. Iza turned back to the darkening street outside. The day had dragged on tediously. Interminably. Perhaps she should have gone to Sochaczew with the others. After all, she had made numerous visits to Topolostan—Poplar Estate—as a child, when it was owned by Anna's parents, the Berezowskis. Her mother had expected as much and kept it no secret how disappointed she was that Iza chose to stay home. Her mother seldom minced words. Iza supposed now she should have gone if only to keep peace in the family.

It had been the thought of a journey in a crowded carriage that put her off: three adults, not counting her, plus the twins, who could be a handful in such close quarters. She had not forgotten what it was to go on an enjoyable outing, but she was certain this one would not measure up. Oh, she could have tolerated the children—and even her mother—and would have most enjoyed the time spent with Barbara, her childhood friend and confidante. Since leaving the convent, Iza had spent too little time with Barbara, who now had the added responsibilities of a husband and twin boys. She thought of Viktor now. He seemed an odd sort for Barbara. A Russian government worker and all that. She resolved to be fair, though, telling herself she had had too few interactions with him to set a judgment in stone.

It was just that back in their years together at convent school, Barbara had always seemed so lively and independent, much more so than she. Marrying Viktor seemed to go against the grain. He seemed to lack—what? Warmth? Spontaneity? Iza could not put her finger on it. But something about him had won Barbara over. What was it? She could only trust that her dearest friend had made a wise decision.

Iza had to admit she was curious about the Princess Anna. It would have been good to see her. How had she weathered the last few years? Had she aged? How was her spirit, considering her youngest had gone into the military against her wishes—and her husband Jan had been bound and packed off to Russia on trumped up charges? And Jan Michał, the countess' eldest. What was he like? Try as she might, Iza could not imagine Michał, as he was called so as not to confuse him with his father Jan. Was he still handsome after all these years—and out of uniform? An image of him at nearly forty was hard to conjure. After their youth, it seemed he was always on campaign, and then, of course, it was she who staged a disappearance, not in some remote and romantic place, but within the environs of Warsaw, behind the high convent walls on Wolska Street. Another world, it was.

Yes, she was curious about the princess and Michał, but she also had to admit, if only to herself, that it was more than a crowded carriage that held

her back from making the journey to an estate that offered happy childhood memories of summer visits. She had to concede the truth to herself—and a heated blush to her cheeks confirmed it—that she was afraid to be caught on a social occasion with so many people. Afraid. The thought disturbed her, but she did doubt her capacity for conversation, her ability to sustain the interest of others. Or she herself might be *too much* of interest. Having left the convent, she would be the object of others' curiosity. Sometimes she felt she had *become* a curiosity. And, family or no, there would be queries—subtle, polite, and even the unspoken kind that arise in conversation lulls. Others might be brutally direct. If provoked, she might say the wrong thing. When the waters were stirred, she might speak on impulse, as she had on occasion in the convent—to the dismay of her superiors. It was a failing she was attempting to rectify. There might be other guests, too, at the Sochaczew estate. There was that possibility. Strangers. It was too much to imagine. Too much to leave to chance. She had made the right decision in staying home.

Movement outside caught Iza's eye. She noticed several groups of people walking toward Saint Martin's Church, which was situated across Piwna Street, just down a bit from the town house. She glanced at the mantel clock. It was time for Vespers.

On Wolska Street, too, the sisters would be leaving their cells and going to chapel. Some of them, Iza knew, would be passing her cell, now bare and empty. Would they think of her, these friends, companions, and sisters of the past few years? Or was memory of her already fading, like the light outside? Perhaps some young postulant had been admitted and assigned her cell. Surely that would facilitate forgetfulness, much as the River Lethe purged the past.

She should have stayed, Iza thought now. She had been content on Wolska Street. She should have stayed. But it had been taken out of her hands. A mere week away from the final vows—when she would change the white veil for the black—came a seemingly innocuous summons to Abbess Teodora's office that changed everything. Everything.

Now a bustling in the nearby dining hall and muted clamor in the kitchen drew Iza's attention. The carriage bringing her mother, Barbara, Viktor, and the twins was arriving at the stable to the rear of the town house.

Like quicksilver Iza stood and hurried to the dining hall where Elzbieta was laying the table. "Elzbieta, be so good as to tell my mother I have retired for the night with a headache." She did not wait for a reply and made for the stairway.

As she climbed the stairs to her rooms on the first floor, she thought—with humor and truth—*Look at me, returned to the world, and already telling lies.*

## SOCHACZEW

MAY AND JUNE GAVE WAY to July and an unusually hot summer with Michał's thinking very little about Prince Czartoryski's suggestion. However, a day didn't go by that he wasn't reminded in some way that he was not of any real help in the day-to-day operation of the estate. He had been less than truthful to the prince on that subject: he was no estate manager, not really. The Jewish manager, Jacob Szraber, though gaining in years, was fastidious in his dealings with workers and tenants. His longtime loyalty to the family had been proven time and again. Thus, Michał spent much of his days reading, riding, hunting—all the while shutting out memory of the prince's visit, having assured himself he had answered the call of patriotism in his early years, and that now others must come forward. And the prince made no further overture to involve him in affairs at the Officer Cadets School. Michał's mother, on the other hand, had begun to make the carriage trip to Warsaw once a month to visit with Józef at the academy. While Michał saw to it that she was well accompanied by a splendid driver, he himself declined to go.

He thought that in some vague way his not going reaffirmed his stance with the prince. He would have nothing to do with the cadets, nothing. Something else kept him at Topolostan, too: his relationship to his half-brother. He recognized this summer that he felt at his core a distance from and even resentment of Józef, younger by so many years. But he was disinclined to plumb the source of his feelings.

August and September—Harvest Home notwithstanding—passed with painful slowness. The winter months loomed: dark, long, uneventful.

In late October, Michał was returning from a ride when he hailed his mother, who had just returned from her monthly visit to Warsaw and was ascending the stairs of the portico. Lady Anna Stelnicka turned about at his call. As Michał drew his horse closer, he saw that she was visibly shaken. "What is it Mother?"

"It's Józef, Michał. He's different. He's changed." The lively green eyes had dulled, darkened.

"Is that all? He's become a soldier, I suspect. That's the change. He's grown. He's become a man."

The countess waved her hand dismissively. "No. Of course, I can see those changes. Any mother would. But there's something about him now. Something I've noted more and more with every visit. Something secret."

"What about that girl you thought he was smitten with? Perhaps it's not working out?"

"The Chopin girl? Yes, he had been quite infatuated by her. Come to think of it, he hasn't mentioned her of late. But—"

"There's something more?"



"I'm sure of it."

"Something dark?"

"Not necessarily. But something passionate, something like..."

"Mother?"

His mother sighed. "Something like I saw in you and Tadeusz when you both knew you were to follow Napoleon to Moscow. That kind of excitement. That kind of passion. There isn't another war afoot, is there, Michał?"

"No, of course not."

Anna attempted a smile and turned to enter the house.

Michał wheeled his stallion about in the other direction but gave it no signal to proceed. His eyes mindlessly scanned the River Vistula tributary not far away. The setting sun reddened the water like a thousand votives dancing and sparkling within St. Martin's Church, which sat on Piwna Street, just across from Zofia's town house.

Was Józef involved in the type of movement the prince had spoken of? A little ways off he spied a heron wading in the shallows on her long spindle-shanks, beak poised to collect supper for her fledglings. She would do well, for the water was tranquil today, very unlike Michał's eddying emotions.

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